

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

BY
RICHARD MARSH
AUTHOR OF *"THE BEETLE"*



012023.14.11.

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Before they could reach him, with the little man—struggling, fighting, yelling—held tightly in his arms, Lazarus had sprung over the iron railing.—Page 300.

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RICHARD MARSH

Author of 'The Beetle : A Mystery,'

'The Crime and the Criminal,' Etc., Etc.

With Frontispiece by JOHN WILLIAMSON

LONDON

F. V. WHITE & CO.

14 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND

1898



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CHAPTER I

SENT PACKING !

CLICK, click, click, went the typewriters. Without, the day was miserable. The rain came down in torrents. The wind blew from the river right through that side street off the Strand. Within the office, on the top floor of the building, the girls' fingers went click, click, click, as they typed for their daily bread.

There were five of them. Four worked ; one sat idle, a girl, with her masses of red-gold hair and a face so beautiful it seemed strangely out of place in that bare room ; so beautiful, indeed, that its beauty startled the beholder, despite her shabby dress. Big violet eyes looked from under heavily-fringed lashes. Pouting lips framed a rosebud of a mouth. The cheeks were white—with trouble—ay, with want of food, and yet the skin gleamed like satin. The brow was broad and lofty. The nose, which was small and arched, with delicate pink nostrils, lent to the countenance an expression of pride and resolution. This was a girl who would not easily succumb ; who would fight the battle of life with the best of them, who would hold herself undaunted, if needs be, against overwhelming odds.

And yet, at that moment, despair gnawed at her heart.

She was cold and worn and hungry. Everything was against her—the world, and, so it seemed to her, all the people in it.

At that office piecework was the rule. Sevenpence per thousand words typed was the amount paid to operators who did the actual work; one shilling and upwards was charged to clients. If you were skilled, and kept at it hard, and had luck, you might, in halcyon days, earn a pound a week—an entire sovereign!

That was when you were in favour. Madeleine Orme was out of favour, for reasons. For one thing, she had committed that cardinal offence—she was too good-looking. Mrs Griffiths, the proprietress, with whom good looks had never been a failing, could not, to use her own words, ‘abide those stuck-up, painted Judys!’ And though Madeleine was neither stuck-up nor painted nor a Judy, Mrs Griffiths was always harder on her than on either of the others. What in another was venial, in her was criminal. Ellen Rouse, for instance, might make error after error. ‘Well,’ argued Mrs Griffiths, ‘it was natural. The MS. was not quite as clear as copperplate. Who could avoid an occasional mistake?’

But let Madeleine Orme so much as misplace a comma, she was fined. Although she had reached the bottom line, the page was declared useless. It had to be typed all over again. She was punished for the waste of time.

So now, while the others worked, she sat idle, earning nothing, without a penny in her pocket, or the prospect of placing one there.

The injustice of it all made her heart red-hot within her.

A MS. had been given her to type. She had started on it bravely—even gaily. It ran to about 8000 words. It would mean, when done, that she had earned four shillings and fourpence. It was not particularly clearly written, and the corrections had been plentifully interlined; but, if she stuck at it closely, she might finish it in the course of the day, and then, if Mrs Griffiths were in an agreeable frame of mind, she might give her half, or

even the whole, of the four and fourpence when the work was done.

It seemed to her that with four shillings and fourpence one could do so much.

She had typed four pages when Kate Ellis, the girl who sat next to her, had finished the work she had to do. Mrs Griffiths came and gathered together the scattered pages, and presently moved to Madeleine. Taking up one of the finished sheets, she glanced at it. She tapped Madeleine smartly with her finger-tips upon the shoulder.

‘What nonsense is this?’ she demanded. ‘This isn’t sense.’

She was pointing to a line on Madeleine’s clear copy. The girl’s response was gentle; she deprecated the other’s wrath.

‘It is difficult to make out what the writer means. Just there, there are so many corrections that it is not easy to decide which is meant to stand. See, here is the MS.’

With her outstretched finger she showed that at the point alluded to the MS. was such a tangle of inter-lineations that it was almost impossible to make head or tail of it.

Without paying the slightest heed to the girl’s timid explanation, she tore the four sheets of ‘copy,’ which represented a couple of hours’ hard, persistent labour, first into halves and then into quarters. Snatching up the MS., she passed it to Kate Ellis.

‘Miss Ellis, be so good as to type that MS., and be so good as to make sense of it, which Miss Orme appears unable to do. Miss Orme does not seem to be aware that if MSS. were as plain as print, it would not be necessary to send them here to be typed.’

The action was so unexpected that for some seconds Madeleine sat in speechless surprise. Then she sprang to her feet with a cry.

‘Mrs Griffiths, oh, Mrs Griffiths, do let me type it! I will make sense of it—I will! I have had nothing at all to do this week. It is the first thing you have given me.’

Mrs Griffiths had reached the door of her own apartment. She turned with what was possibly intended to be an air of hauteur.

'And I am sorry I gave you that. Miss Ellis, be so good as to type that MS.'

She disappeared from sight.

Her disappearance was followed by a chorus from the girls.

'It's a shame!' cried Mary Wilson. 'It really is a shame! Kate, you ought to have spoken up. You ought to have refused to take the thing when you knew that Miss Orme was half way through it.'

'Miss Orme was not half way through it,' rejoined Kate, calmly. 'And even if she was, it's no business of mine. It's each for yourself in this world. If I'd refused to take it, Mrs Griffiths would have had her knife in me. I can't afford to throw away my bread and butter.'

Madeleine said nothing—she could say nothing.

The incident, trivial enough in itself, was tragedy to her. From her point of view, at that moment hardly anything more dreadful could have happened. As she had said, so far she had had no work to do that week. They were not very busy; as regards such work as had come in she had been persistently passed over—it had been given someone else to do. She was absolutely penniless. To have had it so near her lips, and yet to have had it dashed away, that was the cup of Tantalus indeed. And the injustice of it! She had not made an error, she was sure of it! The error, if one there had been, had been the author's, not hers. At any rate, Mrs Griffiths had not stayed to see.

What was the use of continuing to live in a world in which—toil, strive, struggle as she might—there was nothing but hunger, hardship and despair?

The girl sat with clenched fists and flashing eyes, with something throbbing in her breast as if her heart would burst.

Presently the office door was thrown open with a little rush. Someone came hastening in. A young man of

about twenty-three or twenty-four; short, slightly built. He had an eager, intelligent face, and shrewd, pleasant eyes. He was neatly, yet poorly dressed. There was about him an air of alertness, which suggested that he was not of the kind to suffer the grass to grow beneath his feet.

He carried a black felt hat in one hand and a small bundle of MS. in the other, with which he advanced buoyantly towards Madeleine Orme. A smile lit up his homely countenance.

'Nothing to do, Madeleine? That's a stroke of luck! I've brought you something which I want you to turn off for me at once. The editor of *Fancies* has told me that if I'll knock together a paper on "Queer Trades," he'll look at it while I wait, and, if it suits, pay cash upon the nail. Here's the paper. It runs to about 3000 words. It's now about one; do you think you could let me have it by five? Then I could catch the editor before he leaves.'

'I'll try, Geoffrey; but you know your MSS. are not the plainest.'

She turned to him with a longing something on her face, which, because perhaps of his own eagerness, went unnoticed. He made a little grimace.

'No! You're right there! I'm afraid they're not. Providence seems to have denied me the power of writing a legible hand. I don't know how it is, but so it is. But what is my misfortune is the typewriter's boon; if all MSS. were so plain that he who runs might read, where would this come in?'

He laid his hand lightly on her machine. The blood came to her cheeks; his words recalled Mrs Griffiths' gibe. She turned the sheets of his MS. over with her fingers, smiling faintly.

'That is so. Well, Geoffrey, you don't give me much time; but I'll do the best for you I can.'

'Of course! I know you will! I wouldn't bustle you, only, you see, this is something extra particular. To be quite frank with you, the cash will come in uncommonly useful—especially if I can lay my hands on it to-

night. By the way, I've got a grand idea, one of the best that's been seen in journalism this many a day. It will knock them, you take my word. I'm going to spring it on the editor of *Fancies* if he accepts that paper, which he will do, or I'm a Dutchman. And then, I think, we'll show them.'

It was pleasant to hear him talk—and so Madeleine felt; although she had heard words of the same sort from the same lips before. But there was in the speaker's voice such a note of confidence—of assured conviction—that it seemed, from sheer sympathy, to cheer the girl's despairing heart.

Geoffrey Clifford was of the try-and-try-again sort. Failure was nothing to him. If at first he did not succeed, why, he asked, who has a right to expect to? He would succeed at last, of that he was assured. He would keep on, and on, and on, until at last the goal was reached.

It was good for the girl to come in contact with such a nature.

'I won't keep you,' he cried, 'or I shall be defeating my own purpose. You understand, I must have it at five.'

He turned to go. Just then the inner door opened—Mrs Griffiths appeared.

'Mr Clifford! Is that you?'

He faced her with a laugh.

'It looks as if it were.'

Her manner was as acid as his was genial.

'I presume you have come to pay that small account of yours?'

He pulled a wry face.

'I will pay it you this evening, or the first thing in the morning.'

'Indeed! It has been standing some time. I would rather you paid it now.'

'I have brought a MS. which I have asked Madeleine to type for me by five. It's for *Fancies*—I'm going to take it right away. I shall be paid cash down, and then you shall have your money.'

She looked him up and down ; her tone was biting.

‘Do I understand you to say that you have brought a MS. for Miss Orme to type, without paying what you already owe?’

‘You shall have it to-night, or the first thing in the morning. It’s only five shillings.’

‘Precisely. The fact of the amount being so small is one reason why we should like you to let us have it now.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t let you have it at this moment ; but, as I say, you shall have it, at latest, in the morning.’

‘Very good. Where is that MS.?’ She took it from Madeleine’s unwilling fingers. ‘When, Mr Clifford, you have settled the small account which is outstanding, we shall be pleased to do more work for you. Our terms are cash.’

She held out to him the MS. He looked at her askance.

‘But—I can’t settle with you until that MS. is accepted, and paid for. I assure you, Mrs Griffiths, if you will have it typed for me so that I can catch the editor of *Fancies* before he goes, you shall have your money safe enough.’

‘We do not want your promises, Mr Clifford, we want your cash. Our terms, I repeat, are cash. Here is your MS., if it is of any value to you. Good-day.’

Madeleine interposed eagerly.

‘I will type it for him, Mrs Griffiths, if you will let me, and charge you nothing for it. If he promises to pay you, I’m sure he will.’

‘You forget yourself, Miss Orme. This office is mine, not yours. Don’t show your face here again, Mr Clifford, except to pay your bill. We must decline to do any more work for you under any circumstances.’

With a comical grimace, and a ghost of a smile towards Madeleine, he slipped the MS. into his pocket and went.

So soon as his back was turned, Mrs Griffiths opened the vials of her wrath on the offending girl.

‘Your behaviour, Miss Orme, is disgraceful. You appear to have no proper sense of your position. Who

are you to speak to me as if you were the employer and I the employed? You are the most ill-conducted and useless person I have ever had in my office. And how dare you allow such a penniless and impudent fellow, like that Clifford, to address you, publicly, by your Christian name?—and a most theatrical one it is!’

‘He is my foster-brother.’

‘Your foster-brother? Indeed! We all know what foster-brothers are. They’re like cousins. I once had a servant who, whenever I caught a more than usually doubtful-looking fellow with her in the kitchen, declared that it was her foster-brother.’

The girls giggled. Madeleine went fiery red.

‘Since, however, you claim Mr Clifford as a species of relation, I feel sure you will feel in duty bound to pay his debts. Of course you will not object to my stopping the amount he owes me from the next piece of work you do.’

Mrs Griffiths retired to her own apartment, leaving Madeleine quivering in every nerve. The girls’ glances did not add to her sense of comfort. They eyed her as if she were a peep-show. Ellen Rouse did not confine herself to glances.

‘I don’t see, Miss Orme,’ she said spitefully, ‘how you can object to pay what Mr Clifford owes, since you offered to type his MS. for nothing.’

Kate Ellis struck in with a remark which was, if anything, more spiteful still.

‘That was rather a nasty one about Madeleine being a theatrical sort of Christian name. Is it your real name, Miss Orme?’

Madeleine looked at the speaker with eyes which were eloquent, but her tongue was still.

While she sat there, with panting breast and crimsoned cheeks, and heart that burned, and they looked and laughed at her, and mocked—all three together—once more the office door was opened, and another man came in.

At the sight of him there instantly was silence.

He was a young fellow, probably only just out of his

teens, but there was about him a something which seemed intended to convey the suggestion that he was older than he seemed. And, in some respects, undoubtedly he was! His hair was very fair, and very short, and there was not much of it. It was parted exactly in the middle, so that there seemed precisely the same number of hairs on either side; which hairs adhered so very closely to his scalp that one could not but suspect that they must have been plastered down with soap. His eyes, which were bloodshot, looked out of long, narrow slits. His nose was large; there was a twist about the bridge which hinted that at some period of his career it had been broken. His mouth was wide; when he opened it there was a liberal display of enormous teeth, which were not precisely white.

His attire was, from his own point of view, in the height of fashion. He wore a gardenia in the buttonhole of a short jacket, which was of some peculiarly irritating shade of slaty blue; a flowered waistcoat; and copious trousers of a beautiful pearl grey. The bottoms of these latter garments were turned up so as to exhibit to the best advantage a pair of light brown shoes. His collar was of the turned-down-all-round variety; the ends of a parti-coloured silk necktie, which was arranged in a beautiful bow, straggling, in artistic disorder, over the bosom of his soft blue shirt. He wore a brown billycock very much on the side of his head; a half-consumed cigar was sticking out of the corner of his mouth. He carried a pair of yellow dogskin gloves in his large and red right hand; and a crooked bamboo cane dangled over his arm.

This was Augustus Dauncey Griffiths—his mother's only darling, and, in that mother's opinion, the smartest young man in town. There were one or two other persons who thought him tolerably smart—with reason; but they used the word in a different sense to his parent.

He entered the office without thinking it necessary to remove his hat—or his cigar. And, so soon as he was in, he struck an attitude. He passed the whole of his time in striking attitudes—but that is by the way.

'Oh, you darlings! You dears! You pets! Where's the dragon?'

Ellen Rouse took upon herself to answer. He was her cousin; she would have gone through fire and water for him—and worse. As a natural consequence, he treated her as if she were the dirt beneath his feet; it being the custom with men of his sort to so use the women who love them.

'Aunt is in her room.'

'Is she? Then let her stop there, Nelly, dear! Oh, you sweets! You pretty things! You little ducks! And aren't you working! Of course, when I come in! Before I showed my nose inside that door there wasn't a finger moving—only tongues. Think I don't know you? Oh, you loves!' He looked at Madeleine. 'Hullo, Venetian Red! you're doing nothing! You lazy girl, I'm ashamed of you! Why are you doing nothing to earn your bread and butter? Is it because it's a principle of yours that the less you do the more you get? It is so, anyhow, especially if you are a pretty girl.'

He went close to her—she perceptibly shrinking from him as he did so.

'Do you know how the Venetian women used to get their hair your colour? They used to sit on the roofs of the houses in the hottest suns of summer, with their hair spread out on sheets of brass all round them; at least, so the story goes. By Jove! you have got hair! Do you know, my dear, that locks like yours are as good as a fortune? It's truth, so help me! I know a girl whose thatch isn't a patch on yours, who gets five quid a week from the Cerulean for just coming on to the stage with it hanging all over her shoulders, and the other girls tug at it, just to show the folks in front it's real; fact, upon my siddy! And as for face—and figure!—why, there isn't a professional beauty anywhere who can hold a torch to you—upon my word, there isn't! The dragon don't know what a prize she's got, or she'd try you at some better lay than tapping those corn-raising keys. Look here, Madeleine, it isn't often I give myself away, but I'll give you this gardenia for a kiss—fair, sweet,

frank and free, mind!—and it cost eighteenpence, upon my honour! And you girls can turn your heads aside.'

Mr Augustus Dauncey Griffiths—one loves to give such a gentleman his name in full!—had come close enough to Madeleine to enable him to put his hand upon her shoulder. She shook it from her as if it had been the touch of some noxious insect—turning to him with cheeks which were white enough now, and eyes which flamed. Though hot enough within, her tone was icy.

'Have the goodness not to touch me, Mr Griffiths. And though I esteem your offer at its full value, I fear that it is one which I must—respectfully—decline.'

The gentleman was not in the least nonplussed. On the contrary, he threw up his hands in an attitude of what was meant for admiration.

'By Jove! Just look at her! My dear, you're a duchess—by nature! I give you my word you are! Put a hundred pounds' worth of clothes on you, and ten thousand pounds' worth of diamonds, drop you down among the duchesses at the Queen's Drawing-Room, and you'd cop the biscuit from the entire shoot; I know what I'm talking about, and I tell you straight you would. Now, don't be a fool, my dear—don't you know which side your bread is buttered? If you won't sell that kiss, give it us for nothing. That's the time of day, my sweet.'

Suddenly he had his arms about her neck, and, if it had not been for Madeleine's agility, he would have pressed his hideous lips to hers. But slipping from his grasp, rising from her chair, turning, she confronted him with eyes in which there were lightning fires.

'How dare you! Be careful! Before you have cause to regret it!'

Mr Augustus Dauncey Griffiths showed not the faintest sign of discomposure. He smiled, as if he supposed she was jesting.

'Take it fighting, will you?—like some of the girls do when they're caught at kiss-in-the-ring? All right, I

don't mind ! It won't be the first kiss I've bought at the price of a little scuffle.'

She was standing with her back to her typewriter. He threw himself on to her. In endeavouring to avoid him she was borne backwards on to the machine. There was a sound of something snapping, and at that same moment Mrs Griffiths appeared at the door of her room.

'Augustus,' she exclaimed, 'what is the meaning of this?'

To all outward appearance her hopeful son was still completely at his ease. His volubility never for a moment forsook him.

'By Jove, mother, I don't know—I do not ! I don't want to tell tales, goodness knows ! But I came in here and I—I found this young lady arguing or quarrelling or—something, with Miss Ellis. Really, Miss Ellis, perhaps you had better explain to my mother.'

He winked at Kate Ellis, who frigidly replied,—

'I don't wish to say anything, thank you, Mr Griffiths. Miss Orme is a person I don't understand, and don't pretend to !'

'There you are, mother, you see how it is ! Then she started with Nelly—didn't she, Nelly?'

Ellen Rouse looked at Madeleine as if she would have liked to kill her where she stood. Her words were in sympathy with her looks.

'Miss Orme is always quarrelling with someone—always. It's my opinion she's not fit to sit in the same room with respectable girls, and so I'll say straight out in the presence of aunt.'

'That's how it is, mother, you see. And now I rather fancy the young lady has broken her machine.'

'Broken her machine !' Mrs Griffiths rushed forward, roused at last. She brushed Madeleine on one side, as if she were nothing at all. 'So she has ! Two, three keys destroyed, utterly ! The machine is ruined !' She turned on the girl in a towering rage. 'You—you baggage ! You worthless creature ! who is to pay me for the damage you have done ?'

Madeleine, her brain in a whirl, tried her best to meet the woman's passion.

'I did not do it, it was your son!'

The young gentleman in question strode up to her with an amount of assurance which was, in its way, unique.

'I did it? You lie! If you were a man, I would knock you down there as you stand. It is only because you are a woman that you dare to utter such an atrocious falsehood. Mother, I fear this is a dangerous person. Miss Ellis, did I break that machine?'

'You never touched it.'

'Of course you didn't!' cried Ellen Rouse. 'You never had anything to do with it! But that's just like her, to try to lay the blame on someone else. She's wicked through and through.'

'I've half a mind,' declared Mrs Griffiths, 'to send for a policeman and to give you into custody for destroying my property.'

Her son laid his hand upon her arm; he played the part of peacemaker.

'Don't do that, mother. There'll only be a scandal, and you'll get nothing out of her. You'd better get rid of her as quietly as you can—at once.'

'I suppose you're right. I'll be bound the creature has nothing but the rags upon her back to call her own. Miss Orme, put your things on, and take yourself outside my office, and never set your foot in it again. You may think yourself lucky to get off so easily.'

Madeline looked round her bewildered, as if she felt these things must be happening to her in a dream.

'But, Mrs Griffiths, you are mistaken. You are being guilty of a great injustice. I have done nothing—nothing; it is your son.'

Mr Augustus Dauncey Griffiths threw his hands and eyes up towards the ceiling in an attitude of astounded virtue. His mother's passion flamed anew. She went to where the girl's scanty garments were hanging on a peg, and, snatching them off it, she flung them at her.

'You barefaced, smooth-tongued, insolent, lying

hussy! Put on those rags of yours and take yourself away. If you're not gone in half a minute, I'll put you out with my own hands!'

From her looks the lady meant what she said. Her son, always with an air of virtue, endeavoured to appease her.

'Hush, mother! This person is unworthy even your contempt. I am sure, if she reflects a moment, she will herself perceive that it would be advisable not to stand upon the order of her going.'

Madeline looked at the speaker with a look which should have scorched him as with flame. But it did not. He had his back towards his mother. He met the girl's glances with a wink and a smile. Her tone was deadly cold.

'I am of your opinion, that it would be advisable that I should not stand upon the order of my going.'

She put on her shabby jacket with trembling fingers, adjusted her well-worn hat, while the others watched her with grinning, scornful, triumphant eyes. And, just as she was about to move towards the door with feet which faltered, it was flung open with a flourish, and, to their amazement, they beheld a gorgeous vision in the shape of a towering footman in a resplendent livery of scarlet, blue and silver. He ushered in a little old gentleman, who entered, hat in hand, with an air of the utmost eagerness. At sight of Madeleine he broke into a chorus of exclamations.

'Thank God, it's ~~her~~^{she}! In the very nick of time! It's a miracle, nothing less!'

He addressed himself to the girl with a bearing of the extremest deference.

'My dear young lady, will you permit me to entreat you to come with me at once? It is a matter of life and death, and the carriage waits for us below.'

The girl drew back—in not unnatural surprise.

'But—I do not know you. There is some misunderstanding. You take me for someone else.'

Both the stranger's eagerness and deference became, if possible, greater than before.

‘There is no mistake; I entreat you, with all my heart and soul, my dear young lady, to believe that there is no mistake. If you would avoid a grievous and irreparable calamity, I implore you, with all the strength of which I am capable, to come, without a moment’s hesitation, with me at once. All necessary explanations shall be given you at the proper time. Only come, my dear young lady, come!’

Mrs Griffiths interposed rudely.

‘I fancy, sir, you are making a blunder. I feel it only right to tell you that this young person is one of my operators, whom I have just discharged for serious misconduct.’

The stranger drew himself up a little, as if he resented the lady’s interference. He glanced towards her with a look of inquiry. Then he bestowed on her a slight but courteous inclination of his head; the fashion of his reply proving him to be a very dignified old gentleman indeed.

‘I am obliged to you for your information, which, however, was unasked. I think, madam, that the blunder is yours, not mine. In matters of a certain sort it is not my wont to blunder, or I should not now be occupying the position which I do. I have been dispatched to bear this young lady post haste on an affair of the first importance to the Countess of Staines.’

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL IN THE PICTURE

So far as she knew, Madeleine had never ridden in a real carriage before ; she sat in this one as in a dream. She had noted, on entering, the crest and coat-of-arms upon the door ; the coachman, in his powdered wig, upon the box ; the pair of grand bay horses in their glittering harness ; and now, as she leaned back among the yielding cushions—realising, for the first time in her life, what perfect cushions really were!—she wondered if she was playing a part in some strange fairy tale.

Whose carriage was this ? Why was she in it ? Where was it bearing her ?

Little information could be gleaned from the courteous old gentleman who sat with such demure decorum on the seat in front of her. So affected, indeed, was she by the surprising nature of the position in which she found herself, that she hardly dared to question him.

‘Where are you taking me ?’ she asked.

‘To the Countess of Staines.’

Not only were the words uttered in a tone of the most exquisite deference, but they were accompanied by a slight obeisance ; and yet, in spite of herself, Madeleine trembled. The Countess of Staines ! One of the greatest and grandest ladies in England. Madeleine’s knowledge of the peerage did not extend very far, but she did know so much.

‘What,’ she timidly inquired, ‘can the Countess want with me ?’

‘It will be explained when we arrive. Have patience, I entreat you.’

He held out his hands towards her with a little gesture of deprecation, as if he were imploring her to show him mercy. She asked him nothing else, perceiving that she would receive no other answer. But as the luxurious vehicle rolled swiftly forward on its pneumatic tyres, she was conscious that her companion's eyes were fixed on her all the time, with something in them—as it seemed to her—of wonder, reverence, entreaty, ay, even of fear.

The carriage stopped before a wide flight of steps which led up to a huge mansion at the corner of a spacious square. In an instant the carriage door was open, she was being escorted by a footman up the steps under cover of an enormous umbrella. The great hall door had flown open as by magic. She found herself entering a lofty hall, and being received, as if she were a princess, by gorgeous footmen on either hand.

Her companion followed on her heels. When they were in he reverentially inclined towards her his head, and said, in a whisper which could have been audible to herself alone,—

‘May I entreat you to come this way?’

He led, she followed, up a magnificent staircase, round corners, through corridors, on, and on, and on, till she wondered how big the house could be; she had never supposed that there were such houses, except in the occupation of kings and queens.

He paused at a door, at the panel of which he tapped. A voice within said,—

‘Come in!’

He opened the door, retaining the handle in his grasp, bowing Madeleine through it. She entered in a maze of doubt as to what it was that she expected.

She found herself in a spacious chamber, which reminded her in the first flush of perception of the Arabian Nights. Never, out of a fairy tale, had she imagined that a room could be furnished with such singular, nay, such barbaric magnificence. The colour scheme in itself was dazzling; purple, gold and crimson, wherever she looked these gorgeous hues, either alone,

or in more or less subtle combination, flashed on her startled eyes, in all the richest stuffs of the world's remotest and most famous looms. The carpet was of purple velvet, of a pile so rich that it covered her ankles. It had a golden border, and right in the centre, like a blob of blood, was a spot of crimson, of the diameter, perhaps, of the palm of a man's hand. And exactly on this spot, either by accident or set purpose, there stood a woman who was as little in keeping with her surroundings as she easily could have been.

She was of advanced age, probably between sixty and seventy. Her hair, which was worn in plain, straight, old-fashioned bands, was of silver whiteness. Her dress was of simple, unrelieved black silk, except that at the wrists she wore turned-back cuffs of snowy lawn. Her homely, wrinkled face was beautiful—it was so sweet and gentle; and in the eyes, which were still clear and bright, there was a look of such tenderness and peace.

And yet it was obvious that, at the moment, she was troubled. As Madeleine entered, she came forward with a quick, eager, appealing, anxious movement, which was pregnant with meaning. She stood and stared at Madeleine; and, as she stared, her amazement seemed to grow, until she became, as it were, rooted to the floor.

'Charles!' she exclaimed. 'Is it a ghost? Or is it she?'

The old gentleman who was thus addressed as Charles gave a reverent gesture upwards with his hand; he, too, stood at the woman's side and looked at Madeleine.

'It's a miracle! One of God's own!'

She echoed his words.

'It is a miracle, indeed, and one of God's own!'

The curious couple continued to stare. Presently the woman advanced with outstretched hands.

'My dear! my dear! my dear!'

There was such a wealth of love in the words, in the tone in which they were uttered, in the attitude of the utterer, that it went straight to Madeleine's poor starved heart; never had such a wealth of affection been bestowed on her. She would have given the world to rush into

the outstretched arms, and to pillow her weary head upon that sheltering breast. But the conviction that she was, that she must be, the victim of some singular mistake, and that this tenderness could not, from the very nature of things, really be meant for her, trammelled her limbs. She shrank back, doubtfully.

‘I am sure,’ she said, ‘that there is some very strange mistake—that I am not the person you suppose. I am nothing, and no one at all—a penniless, and a friendless girl.’

As she spoke, the old lady clapped her hands with a little cry of rapture. She turned to the old gentleman.

‘It is her voice!—her very voice! As you say, it is, indeed, a miracle!’

‘Is it not? Did I not tell you? Truly, is it not incredible? Who would have thought that God would have given two such creatures to the world?—and yet He has!’

‘Indeed, and indeed He has!’ Again she advanced towards Madeleine, who again shrank back. ‘My dear, do not shrink from me. There is no mistake, I assure you, there is none. It’s only one of God’s miracles, that’s all. Come, you must let me dress you. The time passes—the Countess will be waiting.’

Feeling quite incapable of argument—although still persuaded that there was an error somewhere, and an amazing one—Madeleine suffered the old lady to lead her into a room. It was a bedroom—but such a bedroom as had never entered within the four corners of even her wildest dreams. The walls were hung with pale pink satin. The curtains, bed hangings, carpet, furniture coverings were of the faintest shade of faint light blue. The wardrobes, of which, to Madeleine’s unaccustomed eyes, there were a surprising number, were of creamy white, as was the washhand stand and the dressing table. To Madeleine it seemed that this must be the very habitation of some fairy queen.

To add to her bewilderment, without asking her permission by so much as a word, the old lady commenced to remove her worn and shabby clothing.

‘What are you doing to me?’ she inquired, with faint remonstrance.

‘Undressing you, my dear. You must have a bath—it will do you good.’

Presently she found herself being led to still another apartment, where was a bath of snow-white marble filled with perfumed water. Into this, willingly enough, she plunged. The touch of the water was delicious. She gave great sighs of satisfaction. Her wearied body seemed momentarily to revive. Every instant the warm, eager blood of youth flowed swifter through her veins. When she rose from the bath, a realisation of the perfect beauty of which painters only dream, she felt like a new creature.

The old lady, returning to assist her with her toilet, held up her hands.

‘My dear, my dear, how lovely you are! I had never thought that God would have made two of His creatures so beautiful; but indeed His powers are infinite.’

At this outspoken praise Madeleine blushed a rosy red, which the old lady promptly noted.

‘Ah, there you’re different—at last! She never blushed—never in all her life!’

Madeleine was returned to the bedroom, where she was enshrined in garments the like of which she had never supposed the existence. She had all a young girl’s natural love for delicate apparel, but this was something altogether beyond even the range of her young heart’s imaginings. Everything was fashioned of the finest and most delicate-hued silks, and trimmed—with a liberal appreciation of what trimmings ought to be—with the costliest laces. She realised very quickly that this old lady was putting a fortune on her back; that is, in money value, as much as she would be likely to earn—and more—if she worked Mrs Griffiths’ typewriters her whole life long.

Had she, indeed, suddenly become a fairy princess. And was this Wonderland?

While she was in the very middle of her toilet an incident occurred which showed that even if she was in the

realms of romance she was still within the reach of disagreeable possibilities.

All at once the bedroom door was opened, and without any sort of warning, someone entered.

Her back was towards the door ; she was seated in a chair at the moment, and the old lady was doing her hair ; it was the first time it had ever been done by any person but herself. As the door opened the old lady gave it a dexterous twist, so that its luxuriant abundance served to effectually conceal her countenance, and at the same moment her deft attendant whispered in her ear,—

‘Don’t look round ; it’s the Lady Hildegarde. Answer her as shortly as you can.’

Madeleine did as she was bid, realising, as she kept her face averted, what a false position it was she occupied.

A strident feminine voice addressed her from behind.

‘So you have returned ; I thought you had gone for good.’

Madeleine faintly replied, remembering the old lady’s injunction, in a voice which, despite herself, was tremulous.

‘Yes, I have returned.’

‘And in a milder mood it seems. Your voice is not quite so loud pitched as when I heard it last.’ The speaker’s own voice was loud pitched enough in all conscience ! ‘I hope that the milder mood will continue to prevail ; it had better for your own sake, I promise you. If you are not careful, the number of your escapades will reach one too many. There is a limit to Conrad’s patience, as well as to mine, although you may not think so. I have only to tell him of one or two passages with which I am acquainted, and he would be as willing to connect himself with a woman of the street as with you.’

It seemed that the speaker had gone, for the door had banged ; but she immediately returned.

‘By the way, the Countess will be ready for you shortly, mind you’re ready for her ; and disposed to behave yourself better than you have done of late. She has been making inquiries about certain little episodes which we

have found it difficult to satisfy. I promise you, her patience is waning fast.'

Once more the door banged; this time it seemed that the strident-voiced lady had gone for good. Madeleine, trembling in every limb, turned her crimsoned face towards the old lady, who still wrought deftly with the glories of her hair.

'Tell me what is the meaning of all this? Why have you brought me here?'

The old lady strove to calm her.

'Hush, my dear, hush! I will tell you all about it if you will keep still. If you are not careful, you will tangle your hair.'

'What does it matter about my hair? I have always done it for myself, and I can do it still. Leave it alone, and tell me, first, why you have introduced me to a stranger's house—why you are putting on me another person's things. If you are proposing that I should play a part in some scheme of organised deception—which I am beginning to suspect you are—I tell you plainly that I will have no hand in it. My life does not move in the same orbit as that of countesses, but my honour is as dear to me as if it did; at all and every cost I will keep it stainless and unspotted from the world.'

In her excitement Madeleine had risen from her seat, and stood, with the magnificent splendour of her radiant hair streaming loose over her lovely shoulders, facing her gentle-mannered attendant as if she were an accusing spirit.

The old lady shook her head, and looked at her with a suspicious something gleaming in her kindly eyes.

'My dear! my dear! you're even like her in your temper. It's a miracle, indeed!'

'Like who? Who am I like? And what is a miracle? Say plainly what you mean.'

'I will, if you will sit down and let me finish your hair. I cannot talk quietly to you, my dear, while you are raging at me with your hair all down your back; it isn't in human nature. Sit down and let me finish, and, while I'm doing so, I will tell you all there is to

tell, as plainly as you yourself can wish, and answer all the questions you may choose to ask.'

'Very well,' said Madeleine, and sat down. 'Now tell me everything; and, first of all, who did that lady take me for?'

'My dear, you are Miss Maud Dorrincourt.'

'Miss Maud Dorrincourt!' Madeleine whirled round on her chair; only the old lady's dexterity saved her from pulling a handful of the girl's hair out by the roots. 'I am nothing of the kind, I am Madeleine Orme.'

'My dear, if you are so hasty, you will make me do some mischief to your beautiful hair.' The old lady's manner was as placid as the other's was the reverse.

'My dear, at present you are Miss Maud Dorrincourt.'

The speaker resumed the task of arranging the other's shining locks as collectedly as if nothing beyond the merest commonplaces were being exchanged, and once more the girl interrupted the proceedings by springing from her seat.

'I am not Miss Maud Dorrincourt! neither now, nor at any other time! What nonsense are you talking? Will you explain?'

Still the other's manner showed no symptoms of being ruffled.

'If you will permit me, that is just what I wish to do. But how can I if you keep stopping me? Sit still, and try and be a little patient, child.'

Thus urged, the girl again resumed her place, and the other her task, her deft fingers never ceasing, although her tongue kept wagging. There was in her tone, as she proceeded, a pathetic, a piteous, something which, in spite of herself, melted her listener's perhaps too susceptible heart.

'There is a great calamity threatening a noble house. It is to prevent its coming that my husband has brought you here.'

'Was that your husband who came to Mrs Griffiths?'

'That is he. His name is Charles Singleton. He is the house steward. I am Miss Maud's own maid. We

have been here all our lives. Long before Miss Maud was born ; in her mother's time—when her mother was a child.'

Mrs Singleton paused. It seemed strange to hear this gentle yet dignified old dame speak of herself as somebody's maid. She went on, with a curious yet eloquent simplicity,—

'We love Miss Maud, Charles and I, as if she were our own child—ay, better than our lives. The Countess is her grandmother ; her mother was the Countess's only child. Her mother made a marriage which displeased the Countess, and for which she never was forgiven. It was only after she was dead that Miss Maud was brought to the house, and then, I believe, it was as much to spite Lady Hildegarde as anything else. That was Lady Hildegarde Fanshawe who was in here just now. She is the mother of the present Earl of Staines, and the niece, by marriage, of the Countess. This house is the Countess's, and the Earl, who has only the title, is a very poor man. The Countess, on the contrary, is very rich ; and she has announced that she intends to leave all she has to her grand-daughter, Miss Maud, but only on condition that she marries her cousin, the Earl.'

Mrs Singleton paused—to sigh.

'Miss Maud is a very flighty young lady—God forgive me that I should ever say it to a stranger. But she has been badly used among them. They want to treat her as if she were a sawdust figure, without natural likes and dislikes, and Miss Maud won't have it. She has kept putting off saying whether she will or won't marry the Earl, and at last she has disappeared.'

Mrs Singleton's voice quavered—she almost broke down.

'Disappeared !' cried Madeleine.

'Yes, disappeared. Lady Hildegarde thinks that she only went out this morning to annoy her grandmother, who hates her going out alone. But she went last night.'

'But where did she go to ?'

'Charles and I have our suspicions, and I especially

have mine. She has told me more than once that she was going, but I pretended not to believe her. And now she has been as good as her word and gone. There's a music man about the place who is no better than he ought to be, and I fear that he knows more about Miss Maud's disappearance than he should. Anyhow, the chief thing to be done is to keep her absence from her grandmother—the Countess would think no more of turning her out penniless into the streets than nothing. She would serve her as she served her mother.'

'But how are you going to prevent her finding out?'

'You are going to do that.'

'I!'

'Yes, you, if you are the kind-hearted young lady I take you to be.'

'But—you are mad! How am I, a perfect stranger, to do this altogether impossible thing?'

'It's in this way: Charles was going out early this morning to make certain inquiries, when he saw, as he thought, Miss Maud in front of him. She was not dressed as Miss Maud is generally dressed, but still he made no doubt that it was she. He followed to see where she went, and, to his surprise, she passed through a doorway within which, it was announced, were the offices of a certain typewriting company. He came back and told me what he had seen. "It's not Miss Maud," I said. "I don't believe it is Miss Maud." You see, I had reasons of my own for my belief. "But, whoever it is, fetch her here quickly, and let me have a look at her. The Countess has been inquiring for Miss Maud—the old lady's in one of her tempers, and if the child can't be found, Heaven alone knows what the result will be!" Well, he fetched you.'

Mrs Singleton's hands obviously quivered, and her voice quivered with them.

'My dear, when I saw you I could scarcely believe my own eyes—you are Miss Maud's own double. In colour, height, figure, features, voice and bearing, you are as like her as one pea is like another. Were you

dressed alike, and in the same room together, there would be continual confusion as to which was which. I have known my darling all her life, yet, when you were in the bath just now, had I come upon you unawares, I could have sworn that you were she ; it's one of God's own miracles, it's nothing else. Why, see, her very dresses fit you as if they had been made for you.'

While the old lady had been talking, her nimble fingers had been fitting on to the bewildered and unresisting Madeleine a dress of some shimmering green material, which the girl could not but admit to herself, as she surveyed the outlines of her perfect figure in the cheval glass which was in front of her, did fit her like a glove.

Before she could collect her thoughts sufficiently to reply, Mrs Singleton continued,—

'What I want you to do, my dear, is to behave as if you were Miss Maud until the child herself returns—which may be to-day, to-morrow, any minute of any hour—to save a noble house from shame, and a hot-headed child from the too cruel consequences of what is, after all, but a childish freak. Oh, my dear, dear young lady.' To Madeleine's horror, Mrs Singleton actually sank on her knees, and the tears streamed down her cheeks. 'We are only servants, my husband and I, but we are neither so poor nor so helpless as you may think. If you do the thing I beg of you, there is nothing of ours which shall not be yours for the asking, even to our hearts' blood !'

'Get up ! My dear creature, you must not kneel to me !' Madeleine raised the old lady, willy-nilly, to her feet. 'I am persuaded that you are under some strange misapprehension, that the resemblance which exists between Miss Dorrincourt and me is, at the best, but superficial. The imposture would be detected in a moment !'

'You think so ? As to that, you shall yourself decide. Come, and you shall see.'

Mrs Singleton led the way into the adjacent chamber—the room of purple, crimson and gold.

‘Stand there! Look in front of you!’

Mrs Singleton directed the girl to stand on a certain designated spot facing the wall, and perhaps some four or five feet from it. The old lady stretched out her arm, and touched what was probably some hidden spring. The gold and crimson curtain was drawn aside; Madeline found herself confronted by a mirror which was as tall as herself. Apparently the spring was touched again—the mirror revolved; again, and again there was another revolution. Mrs Singleton’s arm went back to her side—the mirror ceased to revolve, the hanging returned to its place.

‘Well,’ she inquired, ‘what do you think of that?’

‘I don’t understand you; what do I think of what? I suppose it is a revolving mirror, that is all.’

‘You think so? Observe once more.’

Again the hanging was withdrawn; again the mirror was exposed; there was the young girl’s lovely person reflected, with flattering fidelity, in the silvered glass. Again the spring was touched; the mirror revolved; there again was the reflection. The old lady was regarding the original with a quizzical something in her kindly eyes.

‘Well,’ she repeated, ‘what do you think of that?’

The situation seemed to puzzle Madeleine; she glanced at the inquirer askance. Mrs Singleton laughed outright.

‘Move aside,’ she said.

Madeleine did, and, wonder of wonders! although she herself had moved, her image remained mirrored in the glass.

‘Why,’ she exclaimed, ‘however’s that?’

‘Don’t you see, you goose, that it isn’t you at all; it’s Miss Maud.’

‘Miss Maud!’

‘Yes, it’s her portrait, painted in the very dress that you’ve got on. It’s one of her whims. Now, watch.’ The figure of the girl revolved; a plain mirror took its place. ‘You see, that’s what you looked at first; you saw yourself reflected in it. Then I turned it round,

like that! you saw Miss Maud's portrait painted on a mirror, and you still believed it to be your own reflection. If you cannot tell her from yourself, then who do you suppose is likely to be able to?'

Madeleine drew nearer to what she now perceived was indeed a portrait. The resemblance to herself was marvellous. The girl looked at her out of a mirror, exactly as her own image had done a second ago; it seemed incredible that the portrait was not actually her own. The painter had caught one of her favourite poses, every detail of her face and figure, as faithfully as if she herself had been his subject.

'It is like me,' she murmured. 'It is—it's wonderfully like.'

'Like you!' cried Mrs Singleton. 'It is you.'

'Even granting it, do you think it is exactly modest to stare at your own portrait as if it were the most wonderful thing the world contains?'

The words came from someone who had taken advantage of their preoccupation to enter the room unnoticed; Madeleine immediately recognising in the owner of the voice her previous visitor. She remembered Mrs Singleton had spoken of her as Lady Hildegarde Fanshawe. She felt as, startled, she turned and regarded the first member of the aristocracy she ever, to her knowledge, had set eyes upon, that Miss Dorrincourt, after all, might stand excused if she had run away to avoid spending too many of the days of her youth in Lady Hildegarde's society.

The lady before her was short and broad, and not so much fat as thick. Her head was large. Her jaw was square and bovine. She had a moustache which a stripling might have envied. The bridge of her Roman nose was surmounted by the very largest pair of spectacles which Madeleine had ever seen before a human pair of eyes; there was that about them which inevitably suggested that the next stage with this lady would be a piece of string and a dog. Her scanty grey hair was drawn into a hard knot at the back. Altogether, her appearance proclaimed that she had scant sympathy with

those minor graces which, if encouraged, do so much to brighten the days and the years of our lives.

The vision of this high-born dame filled Madeleine with such a sense of aversion that all thoughts of fear were banished. Unconsciously, she drew herself up with that air of dignity which so well became her. Her eyes sparkled. Her lips were closer pressed.

The Lady Hildegarde surveyed her from head to foot as if she were some lay figure.

'I see. You have that dress on of which I have already told you that I disapprove. Good. I suppose that's intended for a signal—still mutinous—eh? So! The time will come, my girl, when you shall be taught better manners, and soon. If you won't bend you shall be broken, be sure of it! Come! The Countess is waiting for you in the music room. Take my advice—you will this time if you're not too great a fool—be careful of what you do and say.'

'The Countess!'

The girl shrunk back.

'Yes, the Countess. What, afraid? This is something fresh. What have you been doing now, I wonder, that should give you new cause for fear? Whatever it is, I'll be bound it's no more disgraceful than dozens of things you have done already. I know you too well, my girl. Do not think that you deceive me. Another thing. The Earl is there—and Reginald. Behave to both of them better than you did last time, or, as I live, I'll make you smart for it, and that as you never smarted before. Now come, unless terror ties your feet.'

The speaker passed from the room. Mrs Singleton glanced eagerly, anxiously, at Madeleine.

'Go!' she murmured. 'My dear, I implore you, go with her! Do not be afraid, they'll never find you out! I'm sure they never will.'

'I'm not afraid,' answered Madeleine, her lips curled as with a scornful smile. 'Do not think I am afraid.'

Lady Hildegarde's unprepossessing countenance reappeared in the doorway. Her voice was more aggressively strident even than before.

'Are you coming? Or do you intend to stop and gossip with Singleton all day?'

'No,' cried Madeleine. 'I'm coming now.'

She laughed, she alone knew what at.

And she swept after Lady Hildegarde out of the room, looking every inch as much a queen as any that is set upon a throne.

CHAPTER III

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MUSIC ROOM

LADY HILDEGARDE led the way through corridor after corridor, until the girl, following with beating heart behind, wondered if the way would ever cease. At last she paused before a pair of huge oaken doors which time had blackened. Turning, she gripped her companion by the wrist. A malevolent something came into her face, which did not tend to increase its beauty. Although she spoke beneath her breath, her voice was harsh and cold, and full of significance.

‘Take my advice—don’t have too many eyes for Bianchi. We are not all such fools as you suppose.’

Before Madeleine could even attempt to guess at the meaning she intended to convey, Lady Hildegarde had opened one of the doors, and the girl had followed her into the room beyond.

Madeleine found herself in a room of such unusual dimensions that she found it difficult to realise that it could be a private apartment at all. There was room enough to seat some three hundred persons in comfort. A gallery ran all round it. In this gallery, at the further end, facing the door through which she had entered, was a splendid organ, whose gilded pipes gleamed in the uncertain light which stole through the painted windows. The keyboard was illumined by a single incandescent lamp. In front of it, leaning with one hand on the gallery’s edge, a man was standing. Coming from the light into the partial shadow, Madeleine’s eye was at once caught by the electric star which shone in front, and so it chanced that her glance rested for a moment

on the man who stood between it and her. In that brief instant it seemed as if he had made her a signal—to say the least, of a curious kind. He raised his right hand, pressed his fingers to his lips, and seemed to waft towards her a kiss. She might have placed upon the gesture a false construction, or it might not have been meant for her at all—but the seeming was so real that she felt the tell-tale blush mounting to her cheeks.

The man's action, whether the interpretation she placed on it was right or wrong, did more to set her senses in a whirl than all that had gone before. Some seconds elapsed before she realised that Lady Hildegard had led her down the room, and that she was standing before someone who was regarding her as if she were a sort of chattel.

'Well?' said a voice. 'So it's you?'

The sound of this voice roused her to some sense of her surroundings. She woke to find that before her, in a plain, straight-backed oak arm-chair, was seated an old lady. So old that she felt that it would be vain to try to guess from appearances only how old. She was bent almost double. Her chin hung forward on her breast. Her scanty hair was white as snow. Her face was so wrinkled and so shrunken, that it was hard to realise how it might once have looked. She was so thin as to be little else than skin and bone; the bones on the withered hands, which rested on either arm of the chair, were articulated like a skeleton's. And yet, in spite of her decrepitude, there was that about her which suggested that one looked on a great lady. The eyes, seeming scarcely dimmed by the passage of the years, shone with the light of authority. Her voice, weak and querulous though in truth it was, was the voice of one accustomed to command. There was that in her bearing which suggested that she had lived all her life in an atmosphere of deference.

She addressed Madeleine a second time, her keen eyes seeming to pierce her like a gimlet.

'Is that all you have to say for yourself—and to me?'

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MUSIC ROOM 33

The girl's senses reeled, it was all she could do to keep herself from tottering.

This, she presumed, was the Countess of Staines, that terrible old lady of whom Mrs Singleton stood in such tragic awe; to appease whose wrath she herself was here, and in such a terribly false position. What was she to do—to say? Old though the Countess was, and Madeleine told herself that she looked at least a hundred, it was obvious that hers was not the sort of age which could be easily deceived. Little would be likely to escape that intensely scrutinous vision. That she expected an answer was plain. Yet what sort of answer was she supposed to give? What was Miss Dorrincourt's fashion of addressing her?

While she hesitated, the old lady waxed impatient.

'Are you tongue-tied? You are not wont to be! What is the matter with you, girl? Speak to me!'

Compelled to an instant decision, Madeleine resolved to be herself—as natural as she could be. A faint blush mantled her cheeks as she met the other's glances.

'Thank you, there is nothing the matter with me. I hope that you are well.'

So soon as she had spoken she felt that, in some way, she had blundered. There came a sudden flashing in the old dame's eyes which was like a beacon-light. She seemed to regard the girl more keenly than ever.

'It is not your habit to make inquiries as to my health; but I am like you—there is nothing the matter with me.'

Madeleine felt as if the old lady's glances exercised on her the legendary fascination of the serpent—she could not take her own away. The Countess seemed to be peering into her very soul. An interruption from another quarter came as a positive relief.

'We were afraid, as you have favoured us with so little of your society of late, that you were indisposed.'

The speaker was a man, and there was that in his tone which, for some indefinable reason, seemed to speak straight to the girl's heart. For the first time since she had entered what was to her as yet that house of mystery,

there sounded in her ears a pleasant note. With a little start she turned to look at the speaker, and, as she did so, a strange thrill went over her. Was it imagination, or was she really looking at someone whom, in some subtle, esoteric fashion, she had known her whole life long. This was no stranger, this tall, dark-skinned gentleman, with the serious face and the scar upon his brow. With that scar she had been familiar this many a year. Yet she had not seen it or him before in the flesh, and if not in the flesh, then where? For there came on her a sudden, overwhelming conviction that she knew this man, had known him all along, as a woman looks to know one man only—the one man of her life. As she met his eyes something passed from him to her which set her heart a-beating. As if actuated by a sudden impulse he advanced towards her with outstretched hand.

‘I am very glad to see you—looking so well.’

‘Thank you; you are very kind.’

The words were banal, but as his grasp closed on hers it was as though a window in Heaven had been opened and her whole frame had been saturated by the effulgence of the glory. She was all in a tremor, and in the midst of her trembling the old lady’s voice cut in like the rasp of a saw.

‘Hey-day! What mood’s possessed you now? As a rule, you two are not so emotional.’

Another man’s voice interposed.

‘Woman’s always changing. Is it not so, cousin? Have you no mood of tenderness for me?’

This new speaker was on Madeleine’s other hand, a handsomer man than she had ever beheld. He was tall, and carried himself with a rare and easy grace. His head was fairly set upon his shoulders. He had big eyes of deep dark blue, and the sunniest face. His voice was soft and musical, his manner full of charm, and yet Madeleine felt that she would have given half a dozen of him for the one with a scar. He spoke to her as cousin—was this the Earl of Staines? Was he the man Miss Dorrincourt was in duty bound to marry?

Seeing her silent, he persisted in his inquiry.

‘Am I to take silence for consent? Will you not give me your hand, after this long parting?’

She gave him her hand unwillingly. Oddly, the pressure which he gave it seemed to chill her to the bone. He held it for a moment in his, regarding her with eyes which, in spite of their apparent frankness, seemed to her secretive.

‘Why,’ he said, ‘how you have changed.’

Whether there really was so or not, there appeared to her to be a meaning in his words which turned the blood in her veins to ice. Again the old lady’s querulous tones struck in; this time she was glad they did.

‘When you have finished this unusual interchange of pretty speeches, perhaps you young folks will sit down. Bianchi’s waiting. Maud, sit here.’

Madeleine, finding herself addressed as Maud, placed herself where the old lady signified, in a low chair on her right. The handsomer of the two men seated himself on one side, a little in front, in such a position that he could rake her continually with his eyes. The girl wished, cordially, that he had seated himself elsewhere. He with the scar placed himself at her back, now and then leaning forward so close to her that she could feel his breath upon her neck. The consciousness of his near neighbourhood filled her with a sense of comfort; as if he were there for her protection—to guard and to keep her.

The Countess struck a bell which was on a little table at her left.

The man in the gallery, who had been a keen observer of all that had taken place, bowed—with something in his bow, could those below only have been aware of it, which savoured of mockery. Turning towards the organ, he seated himself at the keyboard. And he began to play.

Madeleine’s temperament was acutely sensitive. At all times music affected her, as it does nervous organisations here and there. The man in the gallery was a master. The organ was his chosen instrument. He did with it what only a master could—nor could he have

had a nobler example of its kind to pour out its magic under the pressure of his fingers.

The girl below listened like one in a vision ; indeed, it all seemed to her to be part and parcel of a vision. She realised her surroundings half fantastically, as one does in dreams. A couple of hours ago a harried toiler in Mrs Griffiths' office, and now—what now ?

Was she the chief actress in an up-to-date version of the old Arabian tale of the man who was permitted to be Sultan for a day ?

The organ, to her, sang songs of mystery ; told tales of wonders which, by mortal eyes, shall never be seen. What could have been more in harmony with her own position ? Here she was, a puppet, not only in another's place, but actually in another's clothing. An impostor—pretending to be someone else. And the point of the joke was that she really only had the very faintest notion as to whom it was she was pretending to be. The marvel was that the imposture had not been discovered ere now—the uncertain light of the place perhaps aided her. No doubt the church-like dimness of the chamber assisted her in juggling with the senses of these four people—and yet it seemed to her that suspicion had been aroused. The searching glances of the Countess never ceased to scrutinise her features—what was it she sought, if it was not evidence of imposture ? And the man upon her right—why were those beautiful blue eyes of his fixed upon her with what seemed laughter in their depths ? Instinct with her moved quickly. Already she was persuaded that this handsome gentleman was one of whom, in any case, she would do well to stand afraid. He with the scar—what he was thinking of she did not know ; but she had no fear of him.

The music ceased. She sighed. The rapture of the rolling chords seemed to have strained her nerves till they were tense as fiddle strings. A voice spoke in her ear.

‘How you do love music !’

‘Indeed ! And I have so little of it.’

So little !’

His tone recalled to her that, forgetting to impersonate Miss Dorrincourt, she had spoken as Madeleine Orme. She was conscious that he gazed inquiringly at her flushing cheeks.

‘Come round the room with me ; there is something which I wish to say to you.’

Without a word she rose from her seat. He fell in at her side. Together they strolled slowly under the shadow of the gallery. Her nerves were quivering. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him, if he could not perceive it for himself, that he was being tricked. There was something about this man’s presence which filled her with so strange a sense of gladness, that it cut her to the quick to think of the part that she was set to play with him.

‘You seem changed.’

If his words conveyed reproach or suspicion, nothing of the kind seemed suggested by his tone, and that nothing of the kind was intended, what immediately followed showed.

‘And for the better.’ He seemed to speak timidly, as if he were afraid of how she would take him.

‘You do not mind my saying that you seem to have changed—and for the better? I wish that you always were like this. One might almost think that you had ceased to regard me with aversion.’

‘Regard you with aversion ! I !’

Half involuntarily she gave him one lightning look ; the enormity of the charge had taken her unawares. When he spoke again his voice seemed huskier.

‘Maud, do you know that when you look at me like that you set the blood boiling in my veins?’

‘You are under a delusion.’

Her tone was colder. Not only did his words recall her to a sense of her position, but they woke in her a curious consciousness that her own blood was warmer than it was wont to be.

‘You are more like yourself when you speak like that. I know you better when your voice expresses the

repulsion which I am aware you feel. Still, the fact is as I say—that when your eyes do meet mine they turn me dizzy. And in some odd fashion, which I own myself unable to describe, you seem lovelier than ever to-day.'

'Sir!'

'Sir?—has it come to that?—to call me sir?'

'What shall I call you, then?'

'Is it quite impossible that you should force your lips to call me Conrad?'

Conrad! The name came to her lips spontaneously, not once nor twice, but again and again. An insane desire seized her to call him by the name which he himself desired; but she refrained.

'It would only increase the delusion under which you are labouring if I were to do anything of the kind.'

'I suppose it would. Yet do not imagine that I am under a delusion. I am not so silly. I am perfectly aware that your present mood is evanescent—like all your others.' There was a bitterness in his words which smote her. 'Very soon again you'll take no more notice of me than if I were a cur—all that I know. But your present mood is so unusual, and so becomes you, that you must forgive me if I desire to make the most of it. As I have told you many a time, you are, in outward seeming, my ideal of all that a woman ought to be; but never, I do believe, have I realised your manifold perfection until this hour. I don't know how it is—I suppose, my dear Maud, it is because I am a dunce—but so it is.'

'You are under a grotesque misapprehension if you imagine I am perfect in any conceivable sense.'

This outspoken adulation from a stranger made her burn all over. He misunderstood her utterly.

'I thought that, on that point, at any rate, you and I were occasionally agreed.'

'Are you suggesting that I have ever hinted I was perfect?'

He looked at her with something like malicious amusement in his eyes.

'Isn't hinted rather a mild word under the circumstances, Maud?'

'Are you—are you in earnest?'

'Are you in earnest? In your present mood are you really disposed to deny that you have asserted that, physically, you are a type of the perfect feminine?'

'Sir!'

'Sir! again. What is the meaning of it, Maud? I have known you—in how many moods? But I confess that in your present one you surpass my comprehension.' He went closer to her. 'Why, you're trembling! What is the matter with you, child?'

They were standing immediately underneath the great organ. It was true enough that she was trembling—to such an extent that she had to seek the support of one of the pillars which upheld the gallery to help her stand. He gazed at her, bewilderment, concern, writ large all over him.

'Maud, what is the matter with you? For God's sake tell me!'

'It's nothing. I'm—only a little faint, that's all. Can you get me a chair?'

The nearest chair was that on which she had been sitting—about the centre of the room. He rushed off for it. As he went, the instant his back was turned, something came quivering down towards her from above. It was a flower—a lily. In spite of the giddiness which had all at once come over her, she perceived quite clearly what it was, and as if by instinct, she understood from whom it came. She knew, as surely as if she had seen him drop it, that it had come from the musician above her head. Secure in the conviction that in the imperfect light his action would go unperceived by those who were in the centre of the spacious chamber, conscious that she was below him, he had suffered it to flutter from his fingers over the gallery's edge.

So far as appearances went, she suffered no sign to escape her that the thing had even been noticed. The flower dropped at her feet, and there she let it lie, and there it still was lying when her late companion returned,

bearing a chair, and accompanied by the man with the beautiful blue eyes. This handsome gentleman looked at her askance.

'Staines tells us that you feel faint. That is not a weakness to which you are often subject. He has filled us with concern. Is there anything we can do for you?'

The speaker's tone, in spite of its perfect suavity, more than suggested mockery. She bit her lip as she perceived it was so.

'Thank you. Your concern is quite unwarranted. I am better now. It was merely a little passing giddiness.'

She seated herself on the chair which the Earl had brought her, for she realised, in the face of the other's words, that the man with the scar was, indeed, the Earl of Staines. As she did so, the handsome gentleman's glance was caught by the lily which was lying at her feet. He picked it up.

'Is this yours?' She shook her head. 'No? I am sorry. Had it been yours, I would have entreated you to permit me to make it mine.'

'You are welcome.'

'You are very good. But, since it is not yours, one hardly cares to become the possessor of an anonymous flower. So we will pass it on to Staines.'

He offered it, with a mocking gesture, to the other. The Earl, in a sudden access of passion, struck it from his hand and strode away. The other looked after him with laughing eyes.

'There goes his gentle-tempered lordship in a blaze of rage. When one is the elder brother one can afford to shower scorn upon the younger.'

He turned his attention to Madeleine, leaning his tall figure against the pillar, and looking down at her as she reclined in her chair. She thought how handsome he looked, and how she wished he was not there. The Countess struck her bell, the sound vibrating through the silent room.

'That's the signal for the performance to recommence. How nice it must be to be an organ-grinder of an altogether superior kind, and to be instructed by

bell when to grind. I don't wonder that Bianchi finds it a trifle galling.'

There was something in the speaker's tone and manner which told Madeleine that for some reason or other he expected and intended that his words would hurt her feelings. But since, as a matter of fact, they did nothing of the kind, she bore them with a calmness which, it was plain, surprised him. He looked at her, as if waiting for an outburst which did not come. Then he laughed.

'You've tried to scratch out my eyes for less than that. What ails you, Maud? Do you know that there's something about you to-day which I can't make out at all—something queer?'

She was conscious that this man was regarding her with very different eyes to her late companion, that his glance and his intention were alike unfriendly. The aversion with which he had unconsciously filled her when first she had heard his voice burst on the instant into flame. She returned him look for look, resolute that, at any cost, she would not give herself away to him.

'It is very good of you to favour me with enough of your attention to credit me with differences which exist in your imagination.'

'I am not so sure that they do exist in my imagination only. That remark is more like your usual self, but it is hardly malevolent enough. In some curious way you seem softer, gentler—as if you had had your teeth extracted and your claws well pared. Were it not impossible, I should almost have suspected you of having had a serious illness, from which you have returned—modified. A milder and meeker edition of the Maud I knew and loved so well. Have you been at death's door within the last four-and-twenty hours, dearest Maud, and kept it hidden from your friends?'

There was a malicious raillery in his words and tone and manner which irritated her almost beyond bearing. The organ thundered overhead; but, to her, this man turned its rare harmonies into hideous discords.

‘Apply your criticism to some worthier and more appreciative object. Permit me to listen to the music.’

‘Bianchi’s music?’

There was a covert, and yet an obvious, insolence in the way in which he uttered these two words which made her feel as if she could have struck him. She looked at him with eyes which blazed, then stood upright.

‘No, sir; not to Bianchi’s music, but to God’s!’

She would have moved from him then and there had he not caught her by the wrist.

‘Maud!’

Consciously or not, he exerted a degree of force in holding her which caused her positive pain.

‘Let me go! You are hurting me!’

‘And you? Do you not hurt me—every hour of every day you live?’

His manner had undergone a sudden and startling change. His *dilettante* air had given place to an intensity which approached ferocity.

‘What do you mean? You are mad!’

‘I shall be mad—soon—before you’ve done with me! You’re one of those women who drive men mad. But if I am to be destroyed, we’ll be destroyed together; I give you my word for that.’

‘Will you let me go? Or am I to call for help?—What is the matter with you now?’

Something was the matter. He was staring at the hand he held, as if he could not credit the evidence of his own eyesight, raising it nearer and nearer to his face, examining it all the time with eager intentness, as if about it there was something which he esteemed miraculous. All at once, just as she was beginning to wonder if he, indeed, had gone mad, he transferred his glance from her hand to her face.

‘You’re not Maud!’ he exclaimed. ‘I thought there was something, and, as I live, that’s it!’

He released her hand, throwing it from him with such sudden violence that she staggered backwards.

‘Sir!’ she cried, as with difficulty she saved herself from stumbling. ‘Sir!’

He followed her, hotly, eagerly examining her features with eyes that burned.

‘You’re not Maud—you’re not Maud. There’s a juggle somewhere ; but you’re not Maud Dorrincourt, and that I’ll swear.’

Just then the organ ceased. As the last notes died away in murmurous tremors, the Earl of Staines came hurrying forward.

‘Reginald !’ he exclaimed. ‘What are you doing to Maud ?’ He turned to the frightened girl. ‘What has happened ? What is he saying to you, child ?’

She stared at him with ashen cheeks and palpitating heart, hardly knowing whether or not to appeal to him for aid.

‘Nothing !’ she murmured. ‘Nothing !’

The handsome gentleman laughed, though there was that in his laughter which hardly suggested merriment.

‘What have I been saying to Maud ? Why—as the lady says—nothing, my dear man. I haven’t been speaking to Maud at all.’

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER IN THE SHADOW

MADELEINE parted from the others in the music room. They went their way, and she hers, and then something happened which would have been wholly ludicrous had it not been, to her, so nearly akin to tragedy. She could not make out which her way was; in what was supposed to be her own home she lost herself. She went down corridor after corridor, turned corner after corner, looked at door after door—which led into the room which she had quitted she had not the faintest notion. One or two doors she opened, only to close them hastily on discovering that they certainly were not the entrances to the apartment which was presumed to be her own.

At last a maid appeared. Madeleine leaned against the wall. She stopped her.

‘Will you—will you help me to my room. I’m feeling faint.’

It was a lie, and Madeleine felt unspeakably ashamed of herself for being compelled to utter it. The girl stared at her in evident surprise; Madeleine, remembering what had been said about Miss Dorrincourt not being subject to fits of faintness, understood the cause of her amazement.

‘Shall I send someone to you, miss?’

‘Thank you—it is nothing—if you’ll help me to my room.’

The girl helped her willingly enough, offering her arm for the supposed invalid to lean upon. It was

well that Madeleine had appealed for her assistance; she had been looking at one end of the building, while it turned out that the room she sought was at the other.

So soon as she was safe inside, and the maid was gone, she sank into a chair, feeling genuinely overcome. But she was only quiescent for a moment; the next she had sprung to her feet, all agog with excitement. The memory of the scenes which she had recently gone through flamed in her brain.

'I will go! I will! I will not stop another hour in the place. Better typewriting—better Mrs Griffiths' injustice—better the workhouse or starvation—better anything than this! Why, what I've been doing's criminal—I've no more right to be where I am than the burglar who enters through the window. To think I should have sunk to wearing another woman's clothes, like some dishonest servant girl, and to pretending I am her!'

Although she was alone, she put up her hands to veil her face in the passion of her shame.

'And that man—how he spoke to me! How easily he found out the imposture—as, of course, he would do—as he could not help but do! What is there about me that I could delude anyone into supposing that I was a relation of earls and countesses? Flee!—I'd better! while still I have the chance! at once! He's not the sort to show mercy—to me, or to anyone. For all I know, the tale's all over the house already, and the police have been sent for to hale me off to gaol. Let them come! If they do come, and find me here, they shall at least not find me in another's clothing. I will at least stand confessed in the rags which are my own.'

With eager hands she began to unfasten the dress. Then she stopped to finger the material.

'What a beautiful gown! How lovely it must be always to be able to wear such clothes—always to be clad in silks and satins, and the softest of soft raiment. It is the clothing makes the woman. Why, in such things as these I'm positively prepossessing.'

She drew aside the curtain from before the mirror in the wall.

'Vain! Who wouldn't be vain in such attire? Is it in mortal not to feel oneself above the common herd? Never in my life has my entire wardrobe, at any one time, been worth a five pound note, and now!—I wonder how many pounds I'm wearing now. Another woman's pounds!'

She searched for, and found, the spring which caused the mirror to revolve, and was confronted by her counterfeit presentment.

'It's wonderful! marvellous! As Mrs Singleton says, it's one of God's own miracles. If it were not for my capacity to pinch myself, I should be at a loss to know which was her and which was me. She was born to be fortune's favourite. And I? Well, I hope that I was at least born to be an honest woman. So I'll off with Miss Dorrincourt's gorgeous apparel, and I'll return—if the police will let me!—to virtue, poverty, and, Heaven knows! to peace of mind. And to you, Miss Dorrincourt, so unlike and yet so like myself, I'll say good-bye.'

She touched the spring; the portrait vanished; the curtain returned to its place. She recommenced the process of unrobing.

Hardly had she done so than the door opened, and Mrs Singleton appeared. The old lady at once perceived what it was that she was doing.

'What is the matter with you, child?'

'Nothing is the matter with me, Mrs Singleton. Only—I am going home.'

'Home! What has happened?'

'Everything has happened.'

'Have you been found out?'

'I have.'

'By the—Countess?'

'I have no particular reason to suppose that she discovered the imposture.'

'Not by the Earl?'

'Not by the Earl. But by the gentleman with the big blue eyes.'

Mrs Singleton gave what seemed to be a sigh of relief.

'That's Mr Reginald Fanshawe, his Lordship's brother. I was afraid of him, I ought to have warned you. He's a dangerous man, as sharp as a razor, and at the bottom of all the mischief that is doing. He hates Miss Maud; nothing would please him better than to see her robbed of her birthright. I believe he would give a good round sum to have her at the bottom of the sea. But how did he find you out?'

'That is more than I can tell you. So far as I can make out, it was by my hand.'

'Your hand! Which one?'

'This—the left one.'

Madeleine held her left hand out in front of her. Mrs Singleton peered at it anxiously through her glasses.

'Why, of course, it's the ring that's missing. What a fool I've been! I might have done something to supply its place, or warned you to keep it out of sight.'

'What do you mean by "It's the ring that's missing"?'

'Her mother's ring. Mrs Dorrincourt's hand was smaller than yours—or than Miss Maud's—and quite as beautiful. I think ladies' hands were smaller when I was young. Miss Maud began to wear her mother's ring when she was quite a little girl, on the third finger of the left hand. She wears it still, although her hand has grown so that it has become embedded in the flesh; you would have to file it in two to get it off. I suppose that Mr Reginald looked at your hand, and saw that it was missing?'

'He did. He stared at it as if it were some wondrous thing. By it I was discovered. So you see that, now, I have no option but to take myself away.'

'My dear, I hope you will do nothing of the kind. Nobody cares for Mr Reginald, except his mother; I doubt if he has a friend in the house. I know him better than you do—he is no more capable of going and telling them right out what it is he has discovered than he is of flying. He will keep his knowledge to himself, and try to use it for purposes of his own. If you

suppose me incapable of throwing dust in his eyes, you give me less credit than I deserve.'

'I am afraid, Mrs Singleton, that in any case I shall be unable to assist you in what you call "throwing dust" into Mr Reginald Fanshawe's eyes. I would not go through again what I have gone through in that music room for—a great deal of money. I did not know to whom I was talking—I had not the faintest notion how to address them, or what to say. Every word which was spoken to me was an added torture. I felt all the time that I was standing on the thinnest of thin ice, which at any moment might break and cause me to be engulfed in the deep waters for ever and for aye. No, thank you, Mrs Singleton, I have acted so far against my better judgment, against every principle of honour and integrity by which I have endeavoured to rule my life. Now, indeed, you must let me go.'

'But, my dear, it will do you no harm to stay the night.'

'It will do me harm to stay another hour.'

'Listen to me!—do not be so rash!'

'It is you who are rash. Don't you perceive the discovery which you are momentarily risking, and how serious the consequences of such a discovery would be?'

'There will be no discovery—I am sure of it! I am certain! Besides, better run the risk of that than of something infinitely worse. Now listen to me, and be patient with me, child. My husband has reason to believe that he has scent of Miss Maud's whereabouts.'

'Be frank with me—have you yourself no notion where she is?'

'Not the faintest. Miss Maud is hot-headed, impetuous, discontented. I am afraid she is not without cause for discontent. She has threatened over and over again that she would vanish, and at last she has been as good as her word. She is not so blameworthy as may appear; but if the Countess discovers what she has done, explanation will be useless—she'll be hung first and tried afterwards. My husband assures me he is on her track, that she'll be found to-night. If she is, I promise you she'll

be brought back at once, and in the morning you'll be free.'

'And, in the meantime, I'm to carry on the imposture, to continue to act as her double, in face of the discovery which has already occurred?'

'You need fear nothing, rest assured. It will be easy enough. You needn't dine with the family.'

'Dine with the family!' Madeleine shuddered. 'Not for a million pounds!'

'You need not. You can dine in your own room—any excuse will serve. Miss Maud often does. I only want to have you on the premises in case of accident.'

'In case of accident? Thank you, Mrs Singleton. It is a pleasant prospect which you offer me.'

'But, my dear, consider the good that you will do. You will save this much-wronged child—for she has been sorely wronged—from eternal wreckage, from complete destruction—for I tremble to think of what would happen to her if the Countess cast her off. Think of the consequences which may ensue.'

Mrs Singleton's eloquence was curtailed by a knocking at the door. A maid appeared.

'If you please, Mrs Singleton, the Countess wishes to speak to you.'

The maid retreated. The old lady looked imploringly at Madeleine.

'It is nothing; she often sends for me. Promise me that you will wait here till I return.'

Madeleine's tone, as she replied, was a trifle grim.

'I promise you that; but you must clearly understand that I promise you no more.'

Left alone, Madeleine, as she seated herself in a luxurious easy chair, was conscious of curiously mingled feelings. It was odd how, already, a sensation had come over her that she was, and always would be, at home in just such a place as this, for which the four corners of the world had been ransacked to make of it a house beautiful. Never, so far as she was aware, had she lived in any but the very humblest dwellings; yet, since her introduction to this strange palace, she felt as if she had never resided

anywhere else. Nor had she ever come into corporeal contact with men and women of birth and breeding, her lines had fallen in other places; yet, just now, in the music room, whatever else she had been conscious of, she had been unconscious of the fact that any mental, or even social, inequality existed, or could exist, between herself and her companions. It was very odd.

The atmosphere of the place was getting into her veins. She was aware of a reluctance to leave it. It was as though she had come into her own at last. Honour seemed to point one way, inclination in just the other. She ought not to stay. Mrs Singleton's pleadings were but sophistries; and yet, after all, what harm would ensue if she lingered in this lotus land a single night?

What she did wonder at was, what could have caused Miss Dorrincourt to behave in the eccentric fashion she seemed to have done. Surely she could not have properly esteemed the good the gods had given her, or she would not have flown so rashly to the ills she knew not of. Surely it must have needed a great deal of goading to have induced a beautiful girl, be she as high-spirited and as wayward as you please, to have run away from such a home as this.

As she mused, the door behind her was suddenly opened. She turned, expecting to find that Mrs Singleton was back again. But, instead, something was thrown into the room by an invisible hand, and the door closed as quickly as it had been opened. This something was thrown so carelessly, or so maliciously, that it actually struck Madeleine on the cheek, afterwards rolling down her lap on to the floor. So smartly, too, had it been flung, that the impact stung her not a little. She started from her seat, putting her hand up to her cheek with a cry of pain.

'Who threw that?' she cried, forgetting for a moment that she was there alone.

Running to the door, opening it, she looked out in search of the delinquent. Not a creature was in sight. Whoever had thrown the thing had had reasons of his or

her own for concealing his or her identity. She returned into the room rubbing her cheek.

'You're a coward,' she told herself, 'whoever you are.'

She looked about on the floor for what, as the bright spot upon her cheek was already proclaiming, had been used as a missile. It was easily found. She picked it up. It proved to be a sheet of paper which had been folded and refolded until it formed a wedge. On one of the sides was written in great, sprawling letters, as if with a soft quill pen, two words, and two words only.

'For you!'

Madeleine turned the paper over and over—eyeing the inscription more and more intently.

"'For you!'" I wonder if that is meant for me. It looks as though it were. No name—as though the writer did not know my name—only that mysterious inscription. I am almost disposed to wager that I could not only point out the hand which wrote it, but the hand which threw it, too. Mr Reginald Fanshawe, I fancy, has paid me part of the debt which, possibly, he was under the impression that he owed me.'

But she was wrong; it was impossible to associate that luridly-worded epistle with the phlegmatic Reginald Fanshawe. Without any sort of preamble it plunged at once in the middle of affairs—

'So you would not have my flower?

'Well!

'So let it be!

'You would not have my lily, the badge of your innocence, of the whiteness of my love for you, that I threw down at your feet?

'It is enough!

'He picked it up, this Reginald Fanshawe, because you paid to it no heed—no! You made a mock of it, and he, this Earl of Staines, he struck it to the ground.

'It is an end!

'You have slighted me—not alone my flower!

‘Not for the first time !

‘You have used me as a mat beneath your feet—it suffices !

‘You think you can throw me from you like an old glove ? You are wrong !

‘I love you, unfortunate that I am ! You, so fair, so false ! But, because I love you, I do not suffer myself to be betrayed, and to say nothing.

‘No !

‘I am not of that kind !

‘We will live together—yes, together ! Or together we will die !

‘You understand ?

‘That is my last word. Read it clearly. Make no jest of it. It comes from him whose happiness you have destroyed, whose heart you have broken.

‘You, who have no heart !

‘PAOLO BIANCHI.’

The signature at the bottom ran right across the page ; it was a triumph of flourishes, curiously in keeping with the inflated language which it so bombastically endorsed. Madeleine smiled as she noted it. With laughter in her eyes and on her lips, she perused the singular letter a second time.

‘It occurs to me that there is some slight confusion here ; this letter is for me, and yet it’s not for me. Paolo Bianchi ; with what magnificence he signs his name ! I fancy I see him doing it ! I take it he is the gentleman who played the organ, and played it like an angel, too. It would be as well if there was a little more of the angelic quality in his letters. I thought that lily of the valley which fluttered over the gallery’s edge was directed to my address, and it appears that it was ; hence all these—well, hardly tears. But, Mr Bianchi, you have shared in the common error in supposing me to be Miss Dorrincourt. There appears to have been passages between you and her which—well, perhaps Mrs Singleton does her less than justice in describing her as hot-headed. She seems to have been

manipulating a variety of strings which an uninterested novice would only be too apt to make a tangle of. Mr Bianchi, in particular, judging from his letter and the way in which he delivered it, strikes me as being the sort of gentleman one would like to have as little to do with as one conveniently could; uncommonly difficult to get on with as a friend, and still more difficult to get on with as an enemy. But, no doubt, in these matters there are differences of taste, and Miss Dorrincourt may have her own. Why, whatever's that!'

The room, in common, as it seemed, with the rest of the house, was at no time too well lighted. The windows were old-fashioned, small, at an inconvenient height from the floor, and the wall in which they were set was so thick that it seemed to cast a perpetual shadow. The day was well advanced; the sky overcast and cloudy. The prevailing tints of purple and gold in which the apartment was upholstered did not, especially at such an hour, increase the sense of brightness. It was between the lights, when day is giving place to night; the room was in obscurity.

Madeleine, turning suddenly, with the letter in her hand, saw in front of her what she supposed at first to be her own reflection, imagining that the curtain had been drawn and the mirror exposed. A moment's inspection, however, showed her that she was mistaken. What she was looking at was certainly no mirror.

What, then, she asked herself, with a catching of her breath, was it?

She was standing under one of the windows, so that she might have as much light as possible to enable her to read 'Paolo Bianchi's' letter. At the opposite end of the room, but on the same side of it as herself, was—a figure. The figure of a woman. She was standing close to the wall, which shadowed her, so that in the half light her outlines were blurred and lost. For some instants Madeleine was not certain that she was not looking at a shadow, or that she was not the victim of some optical delusion. How did she know that at the other end of the room there was not some peculiar

arrangement of mirrors, and that she had not placed herself in a position which brought the peculiarity into play?

The figure was so still, so motionless. And how could the woman have got where she was, how could she have come into the room without Madeleine's knowledge? The door was between them. If it had been opened, if anyone had entered, she must have been aware of it. But there had not been a sound; she could have sworn that no one had entered.

It was another trick with a mirror.

Impressed by this conviction, she moved a step or two forward, waving her arms as she went, expecting the the figure to move in sympathy, as figures in mirrors do.

Nothing of the kind. This one in front of her remained stock still.

Was it a woman, then? Why was she so still? Whence had she come, and how? What was she doing there? What did she want? Or, what was it?

Her experience of the day had been of the most unusual kind, of a sort to upset the equilibrium of the most matter-of-fact young woman. And Madeleine was scarcely that. Hers was hardly the prosaic fibre. Imagination with her was strong. The events of the last few hours had given it full scope. At that moment it took wing. Was she in presence of the adventure of the day? Was all that had gone before to be capped with a fitting climax? Was this she was looking on a creature of flesh and blood, or—a thing of air?

She told herself she was a fool; but, in spite of it, there was a shaking at her knees. She had to put constraint on herself to enable herself to speak; and, when she did, the voice which issued from her lips hardly seemed to her to be her own.

'Who are you? Tell me! What do you want here?'

None spoke. There was a silence; which silence reacted on Madeleine's overstrung nerves as if it had been some dreadful thing. She shivered as with cold. This made her angry.

‘Speak to me!’ she cried. ‘Do you hear, speak to me! Tell me who you are, and what it is that you want here. If you don’t, I’ll call for help.’

Still no reply from the figure standing in the shadow of the wall.

‘Very good, then I’ll call for help.’

Madeleine moved towards the door with the intention of putting her not over-valiant threat into immediate execution. Her action seemed to spur the figure in the shadow to decision; she moved also, and to more purpose than Madeleine. To a purpose, indeed, which was wholly unexpected.

Stepping to one side, she touched what was probably a button in the wall, of whose presence Madeleine had been unconscious, and, in a moment, the room was flooded with the electric light. The effect was startling. Madeleine turned to look at the woman who had produced it, and, as she did so, she gave a cry of inarticulate amazement. Staggering back, she stared at her, thunderstruck.

This woman in front of her was her duplicate, her double, her very self. So like her that, as in that case of the immortal twins, it would have been impossible for an outsider to have told ‘t’other from which.’ In face, form and figure she reproduced her perfectly, even to the dimple in the chin and the colouring of the cheeks and eyes, to the glorious mass of red-gold hair. Only the dress was different. The stranger was clad in a flowing teagown of soft, yielding, dead-gold silk, covered with shining sequins and other barbaric ornaments, which gleamed and glittered as she moved. Never, Madeleine told herself, had she beheld a being of such resplendent loveliness—wholly oblivious of the vision she had beheld in the mirror.

The stranger spoke. Even her voice, it seemed to Madeleine, was an echo of her own.

‘This is rather funny. To be asked who I am, and what I’m doing here, is an unusual experience.’

Scarcely were the words out of her lips than, in her turn, the stranger was struck by the resemblance which

existed between them, and, plainly, was to the full as much amazed by it as Madeleine had been.

'Why, are you me or am I you? Either you're my twin sister or my twin soul, or else you are my ghost, or else you are my affinity, my other self, which exists for all of us in this world, or in some other, of whom Goethe speaks. May I touch you?'

'Touch me? Of course you may.'

The stranger advanced, and, with perfect gravity, touched her with a finger-tip on either cheek, and felt the substance of her arms.

'You are solid. You're not a delusion, or a thing of air. But—this surpasses anything. Do you know you're my height to a hair—my figure to a fraction of a shade? Do you know that you've my head and face, and mouth, and lips, and chin, and teeth, and cheeks, and nose, and eyes, and hair?'

'I do seem like you.'

'Like me? You're me—we're each other! Why, you even have my voice—we speak in the same key. It's a freak of Nature!'

It does seem strange.'

'Strange? It's marvellous—a modern miracle! Do you know that, Narcissus-like, it's been to me a life-long sorrow that the world did not contain such another lovely creature as myself, whom I might kiss and fall in love with. Now all my cause for sorrow's gone—that is, if I may kiss you. May I?'

For answer Madeleine held up her lips. The stranger kissed her.

'As for loving you, I'll love you if I may or mayn't. My dear! my dear! I've been the loneliest creature in all this wide, wide world, and now I'll never be alone again. And pray, my other self, what may chance to be your name?'

'Madeleine Orme.'

'Madeleine Orme? It's a pretty name. And well becomes you. Though no name could be lovely enough for you. Madeleine Orme, I've been looking for you morn, noon and night since the hour that I was born,

and now that I have found you, I'll never let you go. Never ! never again !'

The stranger folded her to her breast. And, queerly enough, Madeleine felt as if she was in her proper place.

'And who are you ?' she inquired in a whisper.

The stranger laughed softly beneath her breath.

'I? I'm Maud Dorrincourt.'

CHAPTER V

A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

So bewildered had Madeleine been by the sudden appearance of the most enchanting stranger, that she had never paused to consider that the probabilities were a million to one that she was Maud Dorrincourt. The revelation of her identity came to her as a positive surprise.

‘Maud Dorrincourt! You! You are Miss Dorrincourt?’

The stranger, catching her skirt with either hand, swept her a laughing courtesy.

‘And yours most humbly to command.’

‘But—I don’t understand. I thought you’d vanished.’

‘And so I have, and reappeared—to you, in a vision; a mere transient mirage.’

‘Yes; but I didn’t see you enter the room. Where did you come from?’

‘Ah! that’s my secret. My dear, I’m full of secrets to the finger-tips. I’m a thing of mystery. But the most mysterious thing I ever encountered in all my born days is—you. May I inquire where you came from?’

‘Mr Singleton brought me.’

‘Did he? Indeed? That was kind of him. And, pray, are there many of your sort where you came from, who’ll come for the bringing?’

Then Madeleine told her tale, Miss Dorrincourt listening open-eyed and open-mouthed, bursting, when the tale was told, into a torrent of words.

‘My dear, it’s a romance, a true fairy tale! This morning you were a typewriter—and now you’re here!—

hammering at the keys for daily bread—you do hammer at them, don't you? Isn't that the proper word? A dream of loveliness like you! To think of it, it makes one's blood run cold! Talk of mystery, here's one. You're me, and I'm you, we're interchangeable; it's a fact. There must be some bond of union between us; it can't be merely accidental, we must be sisters at the very least. The evidence is much stronger than in the case of Box and Cox. Henceforward, I'll devote my life to proving that throughout the inter-stellar spaces we have been one, are one, and shall be one for evermore. You understand?'

'I'm afraid I don't.'

'I don't either, so I'll try to put it in plain English. Now that you are here, I'll leave not a stone unturned to show that there exists a closer tie between us than a trick of likeness.'

'But I sha'n't be here. I am going.'

'Going? When? Where? Why?'

'Because you have returned. The need for me exists no longer, if it ever did, except in Mrs Singleton's imagination.'

'But I've not returned—nothing of the kind. Don't I tell you I'm but a vision—purely transient? Like one of the ghosts, I've come to revisit the glimpses of the moon. But I must be back before the clock strikes twelve. Gracious, child, I'm only taking a peep at things below.'

'I'm sorry to have to keep on saying it, but I'm afraid that, once more, I don't understand.'

'Then I'll try to make you. Is that door open? Then we'll lock it, and if anyone wants to come in they can wait. Now, sit down there and listen.'

Madeleine placed herself in the indicated chair, the other now standing in front of her, now moving hither and thither about the room, all light, and life, and fire; the words coming from her lips like a stream of lava, carrying Madeleine before them in their tempestuous flow.

'What's the matter with me is that I'm bored to death,

to extinction. Born an artist, which is my good fortune, I've also been born into the caste of Vere de Vere, which is my ill-luck. My whole frame's alive with music, to the ends of my fingers, and to the tips of my toes. My singing voice is of a sort to entrance the angels, it has quality and quantity; you shall have a taste of it in a minute or two, and then you shall see if that's mere bragging. Talk of Patti and her triumphs, and the ovations she's received! With my face, and form, and voice I could—and would!—witch the world as it never has been witched, as I'll prove to your entire satisfaction, my dearest dear, before we're either of us much older! And, with all this, to what am I destined? To become the wife of solemn, serious, stodgy, stupid cousin Conrad, Earl of Staines.'

'I didn't find him either stodgy or stupid.'

'No! How did you find him?'

'Well, he perhaps didn't speak more than a couple of dozen words to me, but what I saw of him I liked.'

'Did you? Then you shall marry him.'

'Miss Dorrincourt!'

'Don't Miss Dorrincourt me. As the girl says in the play, "Call me Maud, or nothing." To you I'm Maud, Maud, Maud, and only Maud, unless you can find something nearer and dearer. But, seriously, the affair is plain; you shall marry Conrad.'

'How can you say such things?'

'They say themselves. The thing is evident, fore-ordained. The problem which has been tying itself into knots for years is solved. You're me and I'm you, each is t'other. You like him, he likes me—which is you. He'll marry you, thinking he's marrying me, and all will be well.'

'For you? for me? or for him?'

'For all of us! It's obvious enough. I shall see it all quite clearly when I've thought it over, and so will you. You shall marry Conrad; consider that as settled. But that is by the way. To return to our muttons, to more serious matters, which is me!'

She broke into a peal of laughter, throwing out her

arms with a magnificent gesture which went far to show that, at any rate, on the dramatic side she was not lacking.

‘Behold me, unappreciated, misunderstood, constrained to do the thing I hate, to load myself with trammels which would endure my whole life long, while, always, my soul is aching, longing to be free. God has not bestowed on me this great gift of song for nothing, to be treated like that talent which was hidden in the napkin. It was given me to share with the world, to brighten its dark hours, to lighten its heavy hearts, to add to the sum of the divine music it contains. Heaven has its unresting choirs; and shall I refuse to be God’s chorister on earth, since He has set on me the sign? Nay, but I dare not if I would, for I am persuaded that the great gift which He has bestowed on me is to be shared with all the world!’

She spoke in a tone of rhapsody, to Madeleine it seemed with the very voice of inspiration. All at once she came down from the heights; with a plunge, to the levels.

‘The joke is that my grandmother—that’s the old Countess; she has all the money, you know—is almost as much of a musician as I am. She loves it; I believe that if she had followed the dictates of her own heart she would have lived for it. But the Old Adam of birth has been too strong for her. “Family! family!” is the cry that’s always ringing in her ears, and she wants me to hear nothing else as well; but, my dear, it’s not to be, I give you my word for that.’

The girl suddenly sat down on the floor in front of Madeleine, bunching up her knees so that she could clasp them with her hands.

‘My dearest Madeleine, this house, like the folks who live in it, is compounded of mystery. I believe that it’s the oldest house in London, and I’m pretty sure that it’s the largest. I’ve lived in it pretty nearly my whole life long, and I doubt if I know the whole of it to-day.’

‘I can quite believe it’s difficult to know. I lost my way coming from the music room just now.’

'Nothing's easier than to lose your way in it. It's a sort of maze—a kind of rabbit warren, with more ways out of it than the rabbits are themselves aware of.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll tell you. This room in which we are is in the oldest part of the building. Once when the workmen were doing something to the fireplace they came upon a sort of shaft at the back of the chimney, the use of which they could not understand, since it seemed designed to give light, or air, or both, to some part or parts unknown. The discovery set me thinking. I'm of an inquiring turn of mind, and it occurred to me that there might be more about that shaft than met the eye. During the next few months I minutely overhauled every square inch of the four walls you see about you. At last my patience was rewarded. I found—what do you think I found?'

'A secret door?'

'A secret door!'

'No?'

'But, my dearest Madeleine, I say yes. It was by a complete fluke I chanced upon it after all; and, although it's within a few feet of where you're sitting, I'm disposed to wager a considerable sum that you won't discover it. It hadn't been used, so far as I could judge, for centuries. I had to tell no end of stories, and do all sorts of things, before I could get it into proper working order. So resolved was I to keep my secret to myself that I brought some workmen over with me from abroad, who couldn't speak a word of English, and set them at it, and made them do what I required, without anyone having the faintest inkling that they had ever set foot within the place.'

'But how did you manage it?'

'Ah, that's again my secret. But I did, and that's enough. My door leads to a stairway, and the stairway to a room, and not a bad room either. I've placed in it all sorts of things, so that now it's as snug—in its way, which is my way—as a body could desire. And when I'm in it I'm as secluded, and as inaccessible,

and as remote from human intercourse and human worries as if I were at the North Pole, and, I really think, a good deal more so, for they may discover the North Pole, but they'll never discover me—unless you were to give me away, and I'm just as sure of you as I am of myself. For, you see, you're me, and I am you. I've been there a good deal of late, for the worries have been pressing thick and fast, and some nice tricks, by its aid, I've played on Mrs Singleton. And now there's been an all-round rumpus. They keep goading me to marry Conrad, or to say I will, and I won't—I won't! never! So I've taken up my abode there altogether.'

'Really?'

'Well, as good as altogether. One doesn't expect to be taken quite literally, sweet.'

'But Mrs Singleton is in a dreadful state of mind about you. She fears you've run away, or done something desperate. Her husband's scouring London—he thinks he's on your track.'

'Let him think. Singleton's a good old soul, and I love her dearly, but she's not the wisest woman in the world, and she's a little behind the times. Now you're here, it'll all be plain sailing. You'll keep on being me, which you are; and I—being you—will continue perched up aloft, keeping a watchful eye on what is going on below.'

'But, Miss'—the other held up a warning finger—'Maud, what you suggest is out of the question. I cannot continue the imposition which Mrs Singleton has forced, rather than persuaded, me to practise.'

'Now, my dearest, be the sweet one that I know you are.'

And the girl, kneeling in front of her, pressing her lips and cheeks to hers, besought her with such hot eagerness and such bewitching grace, that Madeleine, unused to such cajoleries, found herself unable to withstand her. She did resist to the best of her ability; but the impetuous petitioner drove her from point to point.

'But you don't appreciate the difficulties of the task which you would set me. Already detection has come

from Mr Fanshawe, because I had not upon my finger some ring you wear.'

'It has, has it?'

She held out her left hand, Madeleine perceiving that a time-worn wedding ring was embedded in the firm white flesh.

'I'm afraid I couldn't give up my ring even to hood-wink Mr Fanshawe. But he doesn't matter anyhow. I'm quite aware that he's the sort of person who wouldn't stick at a trifle; but, then, nor would we. We ought to be more than a match for him between us.'

'But that isn't all. I used to think that I wasn't altogether a cowardly sort of person.'

'You're not! You're as brave as a lion.'

'It's all very well for you to say so; but I feel anything but lionlike when I contemplate the difficulties of the position into which you and Mrs Singleton are forcing me between you. For instance, there's this letter.'

Madeleine held out the epistle which had been thrown in through the door.

"Paolo Bianchi!" With what a flourish he writes his name—how like the man that is.'

Maud read the letter through, with a smile upon her face.

'And, pray, of what conduct have you been guilty to call forth such a thunderbolt?'

Madeleine told of the flower falling from the gallery.

'I see. And he supposes it was I who scorned his offering. That's very funny, isn't it?'

'I fear I fail to see the humour of the situation any more, apparently, than does the writer.'

'I'm afraid he has not so keen an eye for humour as I might wish—it's his weakness. Do you know, my dear, he loves me with the sort of love a cold-blooded Englishman could never understand.'

'If it's the sort his letter suggests, I think it's just as well for the Englishman he can't.'

'Ah, my dear, you don't understand it either. And yet, when I consider that I am you, and you are me, I think that perhaps some day you may. Then you'll

speak with other tongues. For I may mention, as the merest trifle, I'm giving you all my confidences ; I never had a confidant before ; you cannot think what a comfort you will be to me—I love him, too, in my own fashion.'

'You love him ! The man who plays the organ !'

'My dearest Madeleine, you must be one of granny's brood, your speech betrays you. She herself could not have spoken of him with a finer, a more spontaneous scorn. Yes, my dear, with the man who plays the organ, by the grace of God, not by rule of thumb. He's a genius, a musician—like I am. And when he plays the organ he speaks to me with the tongues of angels, just as, when I sing, I speak to him. But what a serious face you wear ! It's a matter of no consequence. I don't fancy I love him as much as he loves me. Not by—not by so much.' She stretched out her hands on either side of her as far as they would go. 'I feel sure I can't—I do love to torment him so.'

'From the style in which he writes, I should imagine he's rather a dangerous person to torment.'

'He is, excessively. He's threatened to kill me more than once.'

'Maud !'

'And he means it. I shouldn't be the least surprised if one day he does ; he gets so very mad. The knowledge of the risk I'm running makes our—how shall I put it?—communications all the sweeter. I do love a dangerous man, don't you ?'

'To the best of my knowledge and belief, I don't, and that I can honestly affirm.'

Maud laughed outright. She sprang to her feet.

'You're a quaker ! After all, you're not exactly me ; I never was a quaker, that I'll swear. But come, let's go to the music room, and I'll give you a taste of the voice the world is waiting for—an idea of what is meant by the music of the spheres.'

'To the music room ? But suppose someone sees us as we go ?'

'Oh, suppose ! If someone sees us, then someone sees us, that is all, my dear. But give me your hand, we'll run.'

They did run—side by side, hand in hand, scampering like two young deer. As fortune had it, they met no one on the way. They reached the oaken doors.

‘Quick!’ urged Maud. ‘There’s someone coming!’

In a moment they were in, and standing listening. They heard footsteps pass without.

‘That was a narrow squeak. It’s one of the men. He’d have thought there were visions about if he’d seen two Miss Dorrincourts.’

‘How dark it is!’

‘It is dark—you didn’t expect broad day. I’ve a box of matches in my pocket. If you wish it, I’ll shed a light upon the scene. Or, there’s a button at your back—you have only to touch it, and you can have the splendours of the electric spark. But for me, I love the dark—I love its solitude, its silence, its mystery. When I’m in the dark, I always feel nearer to Heaven and to God.’

Madeleine was still. She found the varying moods of this strange girl bewildering.

‘Come, give me your hand again ; I will lead you, I’m at home here even in Egyptian blackness. This place has been to me a sanctuary. It is so constructed that, when the doors are closed, nothing that is done within can be heard without ; so that it has been to me a temple in which, when darkness and I have had it to ourselves, I have been free to pour out my soul in song. Take care, this is the staircase which leads to the gallery. Here we are ! Come to the other end where the organ is—that’s the place to sing.’ Only a trained instinct could have surmised with any degree of certainty whereabouts they were. The darkness was unrelieved—sight was useless. Not a glimmer of light found its way within. The blackness hung over the place like a pall. The girls were enshrouded by seemingly impenetrable gloom. Madeleine, finding herself pushed gently backwards, discovered that that was Maud’s method of assisting her into a chair. Maud, passing out of reach, vanished into the shadows—she knew not where. She sat in silence, wondering where she was ; where the other was ; what was going to happen.

All at once her heart leaped to her bosom, and then stood still. The blood rushed to her head, her brain was in a whirl. Her frame quivered with a strange emotion. For, suddenly, a sound rose through the outer darkness which seemed to her, in the first flush of her surprise, to be supernatural.

Maud was singing.

Madeleine had supposed, when the other had been dilating on the rare qualities of the gift of song which had been bestowed on her, that the girl was something of a braggart. In that instant she knew better.

The circumstances were propitious. The strangeness of the situation, the spice of adventure which was in the air, the romantic nature of the surroundings; these things, like an effective stage setting, were in favour of the singer. But in the presence of that voice they were as nothings.

The words, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness,' ring down the ages. They convey to the mind a picture of something indescribably pathetic, solemn, dramatic; but here was the voice of one singing in the night, and such a voice! Within it something that was hardly human—sweet, clear, penetrating; a celestial melody. It rose, at first softly, breathing through the gloom, a miraculous suggestion of coming harmonies. Then it swelled, and grew, and soared higher and higher, more and more, till the very building, its every corner filled by it to straining point, seemed to quiver with the rapture of the song. What she sang Madeleine did not know, nor stopped to think, nor cared; it was the music of that voice which caused her eyes to overflow with the passion of her tears.

The voice was still. She sat trembling, wringing her hands, crying as if her heartstrings had been rent. Then it came again, and she ceased to cry. For this time it sang some merry air, told of joyous happenings, of sunlit skies and festal hours. And the gloom was lighted. Madeleine beheld before her, as in some strange, fantastic, dear, delightful vision, an illustration of the singer's theme. And it brought brightness to her eyes,

smiles to her lips, lightness to her heart, a rare tremblement of ecstasy to her enraptured frame, so that her toes and fingers tingled, and her whole body quivered with a delicious sense of peace and life and pleasure.

Once more the voice was hushed. When it was raised again, it was in the singing of a hymn—one of those which constant association has made, as it were, part and parcel of the life of so large a proportion of the English-speaking peoples. Madeleine had heard it in her infancy; had sung it in her baby treble; had grown up with it ringing in her ears, associating it with her better moments and purer thoughts, until it had become knitted into the fibre of her being, and become a synonym for thoughts of Heaven. But never had she realised how vibrant it might become with angel voices, until it rose from the unseen singer's lips, an arrow of song, seeming to cleave the gloom, and to bring flooding down a shaft of glory from the presence chamber of the Most High. Madeleine would have fallen on to her knees had she been able. But she could not. She could but sit motionless, trembling with awe and reverence, as if the place in which she was was holy ground.

The hymn was sung to an end. The last notes died away, lingering lovingly, as if the enraptured air was reluctant to let them go. Silence followed; which was broken by a very human voice indeed. It was a man's, a foreigner's, and seemed to Madeleine to come from close to where she was sitting. His English was peculiar, but he spoke with such a sincerity of passion that its oddity, for the moment, passed unnoticed.

'What a gift! What a voice! What a power! Oh, Heaven, what a soul! You do with me as you will—oh, yes, altogether. You make me laugh, you make me cry, if you wish it, with your singing you make me cry so that my heart shall break. Yes, it is true. But I say nothing, I am content to die, borne to the grave by the raptures of your song. Maud!'

There was a pause, as if the speaker was waiting for an answer to his personal interrogation. None came. He tried again.

‘Maud, where are you, Maud? Do not play with me, do not tease me, do not torment me just now, after singing like one of God’s own angels. Yes, indeed, my life, my soul, my all; speak to me!’

Stillness again. Madeleine could hear the speaker moving, as if he was searching, cautiously, as best he could in the prevailing darkness, for the invisible singer.

‘Why do you hide yourself? Do not hide yourself from me; I beseech you not to. If you could but know how my heart is hungry! What would I not give to feel your presence near me—to touch your hand. My angel, my beloved one, how can you be so unkind, so cruel? Maud!’

It was plain, from his tone, that his search was proving as unavailing as his supplications.

Presently Madeleine heard something proceeding from his lips which, although it was not in English, hardly sounded like a benediction. All at once there was a flash of light. He had illumined the solitary electric lamp which cast a glow upon the keyboard of the organ. He stood within four or five feet of Madeleine, the light shining full upon his face—she recognising in him the organist who had allowed the lily to fall over the gallery’s edge. Although so close to him—her seat was in the shadow, at the back of him—his eyes never wandered once in her direction—travelling round the building in search of the recalcitrant Maud.

‘Ah! I see you; do not think to conceal yourself—I see you plain! Why do you run away from me? What have I done that you should seem to be afraid? Am I a thing of evil? No, not so! I am the man that adores you more than all the world besides—who offers you a life’s devotion! Why, then, accord to me such usage? Maud!’

For answer, there came from the opposite gallery a burst of song—the opening words of the air, ‘*Robert ! toi que j’aime !*’ followed by a burst of laughter. The gentleman replied in kind, singing, in what was probably Italian, something with the meaning of which Madeleine

was wholly unacquainted. The lady continuing to carry out her *rôle*, sang back to him something whose burden was so little to his taste that he cut her short in a torrent of passionate exclamations.

'No! no! you shall not say that; it is not to be borne! No! no! no! Are you, then, of so cruel a nature, of so cold a heart? It is not to be believed. Never! never!'

This time the lady condescended to reply to him in her ordinary speaking tones, and in intelligible English, her voice having in it a ring of mockery as it floated across the building.

'My dear Bianchi, how comical you are!'

The accusation seemed to anger him.

'Comical! How am I comical? how so? It is, then, comical to behold a man whose heart is broken—who is dying before your eyes, yes, by inches!'

'But why are you dying? And who are you dying for?'

'Cruel! As if you did not know! How can you treat me so? My beautiful, loveliest of women! Do you not know what is in my heart for you? What a strength of adoration, what a depth of devotion! How I live for you, work for you, hope for you, for you only? How my love for you is as a consuming fire?'

'But Englishmen don't love like that.'

'Ah, Englishmen! Bah! What do they know of love? Englishmen! They are as cold as their own skies.'

He spoke with a degree and a force of contempt which caused Madeleine to positively start.

'But, my dear Bianchi, you forget who I am.'

'Forget? No, never! That I never do, sleeping or waking, working or dreaming! When I play, it is to you; when I compose, it is from you the inspiration comes. Until I am dead and cold, never, for an instant, shall you be forgotten. I shall bear your memory with me across the grave.'

'Not only do you forget who I am, but you forget who you are. After all, you are only the man who—plays the organ.'

Madeleine recognised her own words; they floated towards her, through the darkness, aflame with a malicious insolence which scorched her cheeks. To her surprise, he received them as a compliment.

'Well!—what would you have more? I am he who breathes life into the beautiful dead soul that lies buried in the metal and the wood. You are a musician; and I. Is not that enough for you? As for me, I ask from God no more.'

'And that absurd letter of yours—which you were so kind as to throw into my face!'

'I did not throw it in your face.'

'Then someone did. Am I to cherish every flower you choose to tumble at my feet—at the risk of being bullied? It's too ridiculous!'

'Is not a flower from you to me a sacred thing, because I love you? If, then, you love me, why do you scorn my flowers?'

'Suppose I care for neither?'

'Is it that, indeed, you play with me?'

'My dear Bianchi, I really find you most amusing. Don't scream at me like that; do you think I'll be afraid of you? Do you suppose that I am not aware that the threats of which you are so fond are merely elementary examples of Italian humour? You're not the sort of person to hurt anyone—not you!'

'I will kill you if you press me too far. I swear it!'

'Then kill me now!'

There was a ripple of laughter. A ledge ran round the top of the front of the gallery, forming a sort of shelf. Madeleine, peering through the obscurity, perceived that Maud had leaped upon it; she could see her tall figure dimly outlined against the pall-like background. She began to run swiftly along towards where Bianchi stood—Madeleine watching, with her heart in her mouth, fearing every instant she would fall.

Something of the same feeling seemed to actuate the man.

'Stop where you are!' he cried.

'Not I! I'm coming to be killed! Why, you coward! You are a coward, after all. Kill me—if you dare!'

He had hastened towards her. Exactly what happened in the darkness it was impossible to tell ; but Madeleine realised that he reached her, and that, at that same instant, she disappeared, falling over the edge, with a cry, into the hall beneath.

CHAPTER VI

SOME INTERVIEWS AT CROSS PURPOSES

MADELEINE'S heart stood still. The intense silence seemed to breathe of tragedy. Whatever hand he might have had in what had happened, it was plain that Bianchi was seized with an agony of remorse as soon as the thing was done. Madeleine could see that he was leaning over the ledge, peering into the sombre depths below. He broke into speech—mostly interjections.

‘Maud! Maud! My love, my life, my all!’

Madeleine had risen to her feet. All at once she came out of her obscurity. She had been seized with such a sudden feeling of revulsion towards the excitable Italian, such an excess of bitterness, that, without staying to think of what it was she did, or purposed, she went swiftly towards him, bent only on wreaking on him some sort of vengeance. He heard her come, and, starting back from the ledge on which he had been leaning, exhibited, at the sight of her, symptoms of a degree of terror which was nothing short of grotesque.

‘For the love of God! For the love of God!’

She went close up to him, holding out towards him her angry, scornful hands, as if she would shower forth on him from her finger tips the torrents of her contempt.

‘Coward!’ she cried. ‘Coward and murderer!’

So bereft was he of all sense of what was due to his manhood by the appearance of what he evidently took to be an apparition, that he turned tail and ran from her

like some hunted thing, his footsteps sounding along the gallery, until he reached a door at the end, through which he rushed, crashing it after him with a bang as he went through.

Madeleine, pursuing her onward way, gained the floor by means of the staircase up which she had ascended.

'Maud,' she exclaimed. 'Maud, where are you?'

It was the same question which Bianchi had addressed to the darkness a little time before; but, in her case, it received an immediate response in the shape of a peal of gentle laughter, which scarcely suggested a person in an extremity of pain.

'Here I am, my dear. Don't shout as if you thought I was in another world, and wished your voice to reach me there. How you frightened that poor, dear Bianchi. He's the most superstitious creature alive, and since he took you for a ghost, I shouldn't be surprised if he never pauses in his flight till he's run all the way back to his own Italy.'

'So much the better. It will be an excellent riddance. But, my dear, where are you hurt?'

'Where? Why, nowhere. I'm a squirrel, or a cat—the cat for choice. I caught hold of the ledge as I fell with my right hand, and then I dropped. I'm long, you know, and it's nothing of a drop. But the sooner we're out of this the better. The dear Bianchi may pause to think. If he does, he may begin to wonder. And, from that, it will be but a step to his coming back to ascertain how that ghost business of yours was worked; in which case it will be just as well if you and I were missing.'

They returned the way they came; again without encountering a creature as they went. When they were back in the room, so soon as she had turned the key in the door, Maud burst into peal after peal of laughter.

'My dearest Madeleine, what treasure-trove you are. We've only got to keep it secret that we've a dual personality, that there are two of us, that I am you and you are me, and think of the long vista of glorious adventure which opens out in front of us. This poor Bianchi, he's seen a ghost. Let's keep the joke going. Allow him to

remain under the impression that yours truly has been slain ; visit him occasionally as the spectre of the victim of his murderous rage ; you be the spectre ! You'll have him in a madhouse in a month.'

'Thank you ; I'd rather be excused. My impression that you would find him a dangerous plaything has become considerably strengthened.'

'Yes, he is dangerous ; that's his charm. It's an affair of temperament. Where, when I'm in a provoking mood, an Englishman would sulk, he becomes stark mad. I'm not sure which is the better. The odd thing is that I am not quite sure that I don't love him ; I really am not, in my way. He's not always all fire and fury. And as a lover, my dear, in the matter of making love he's just sublime. In that respect, no Englishman I ever heard of comes within a thousand miles of him. At bottom, he's as tender-hearted and as gentle as a child, brave, strong, patient—in his fashion, and where I am not concerned—and full of a simple faith in God and His exceeding loving-kindness, in the face of which I more than once have felt ashamed. And then we are united by the bonds of music. What did you think of my voice ?'

'It's the most wonderful I ever heard ; I tremble as I think of it. It seemed to be of more than mortal beauty. I can quite understand your feeling that it is a gift to you from God, and that therefore you ought to use it for the good of all His creatures.'

'My dear, I thank you.'

Maud put her hands upon her shoulders and kissed her on the brow and lips, with a sort of quaint solemnity.

I'm only truly in earnest when I'm singing ; I think it's because that voice of mine half frightens me. It's as if it were a link between earth and Heaven, and as it issues from my lips, a veil seems to be drawn aside, I feel as if I were standing in the presence of the Holy of Holies, and I dare not trifle then. But, unfortunately, people are apt to suppose that because I sing like an angel I am one, and I'm not. Mine is the artistic temperament. I'm everything by turns, and nothing long, and in whatever I may be at the moment, I am

thorough. You see I have the defects of my qualities. Hush! who's that?'

Someone tried the handle of the door, and, finding it locked, tapped at the panel.

'Who's there?'

'It's I—Mrs Singleton.'

Maud turned to Madeleine.

'Quick—it's Singleton! Get behind the curtain; I'll let her in, and play at being you. We'll see how she enjoys being treated to a card out of her own pack. But, stay—we are not dressed alike. That doesn't matter, I'll turn out the lights, and you'll see if in the darkness she doesn't take me for you.'

Her actions were suited to her words. Madeleine found herself hurried behind a curtain which faced the entrance. Maud, plunging the room into darkness by disconnecting the electric light, turned the key in the door. In came Mrs Singleton.

'My child! Are you all alone in the dark?'

Maud replied with a glib assurance which made Madeleine, behind the curtain, wince.

'I thought I should be safer in the dark, because unseen; besides, I love it. And I locked the door so that no one might come in.'

Mrs Singleton's tone, in marked contrast to the girl's, was full of anxiety. She seemed to notice nothing singular in the other's explanation.

'Let me turn the light on for you now.'

'No, thank you; don't I tell you that I love the darkness?'

Mrs Singleton sighed.

'Ah, my dear, how like Miss Maud you are even in that; how often have I heard her say that she likes the darkness because it's full of mystery.'

'She appears to be a curious person, this Miss Maud of yours.'

'She is, though it goes to my heart to have to say so; she's a strange young lady. But I've come to say how sorry I am to have had to keep you waiting, and even now I cannot stop. I must be back with the Countess

directly. I've had to manufacture an excuse to be able to leave her for a moment. She talks of nothing but Miss Maud ; she's set upon her marrying the Earl.'

'So she ought to.'

'Yes, my dear, I know she ought to ; but, unfortunately, we don't all of us do what we ought, Miss Maud any more than the rest of us.'

'It seems to me that this Miss Maud of yours is a worthless and ungrateful creature.'

'My dear—she's not that—she's very far from being that, or I should not love her as I do. She's young and hot-headed, and impetuous.'

'I perfectly understand. We speak like that of people when they're thoroughly bad characters.'

'My dear ! You must not talk like that. I cannot allow it. I wish you to understand nothing of the kind. You seem to have changed since I left you ; Heaven forgive me for saying it, but you seem to have become more than ever like Miss Maud. But I have come to ask you a favour ; to entreat you, even, if you wish it, on my knees, to stay at least to-night. If, in her present mood, the Countess were to discover that Miss Maud was missing, I don't know what would happen to us all.'

'You needn't be alarmed, I'll stay to-night, and as many more nights as you like. Indeed, I'll stop as long as you choose to keep me, I promise you that.'

'God bless you for saying so, and He will bless you, my dear. You are doing a service to a child whose one fault is the thoughtlessness of youth. And I may tell you that you impressed the Countess very favourably this afternoon. She never supposed but that you were Miss Maud, and Miss Maud at her best.'

'That is very good of her. Though I'm not sure that she gives me cause for feeling flattered.'

'My dear ! Miss Maud is the loveliest girl in London, and the cleverest ! And of as high a family as any in the world !'

'She may be all that. And yet, you know, one may not find the resemblance flattering.'

'I do not understand you. You did not talk like this

just now. You perplex me.' And, indeed, Mrs Singleton did seem troubled. 'But I cannot stay, I must get back to the Countess. I can only thank you, and assure you your promise has lifted a heavy load from off my heart.'

The old lady was gone. Instantly Maud was on her feet; the door was locked, the lights were glowing.

'Madeleine! you little wretch! come out of that!'

Out came Madeleine from her hiding-place. Maud began to dance about her like some madcap child.

'What do you think of that? Didn't I beat her at her own game? Didn't I hoist her with her own petard? That comes of deceiving others—you're sure to be deceived yourself. Take the lesson to your heart, my child.'

Madeleine's countenance was not by any means so jubilant as her companion's.

'You have not made the position easier for me. When Mrs Singleton does see me, what will she think of my having spoken to her like that?'

'Like what? Didn't you hear what she said—that I was more like Miss Maud than ever? Take the hint. Miss Maud is impertinent and overbearing; you must assume those virtues, too. Your mistake is that you're made of sugar and spice, and all that's nice. It's an error. There's nothing sweet about Miss Maud! Miss Maud is sour! But one thing's sure—you'll have to stay, and keep on being me.'

'Maud! I can't! It's impossible! You mustn't ask me; you must not! Every moment I feel more and more ashamed of myself.'

'That's nothing! I'm always feeling ashamed of myself. Shame's a shrub of much vitality; in fact, I should feel ashamed of myself if I weren't ashamed, because I know I'm always plucking at the leaves. But as for you, the thing's arranged. Didn't you hear how you'd lifted a weight off dear old Singleton's old heart, and how blessings were rained down upon your head? You've got to stay and marry the Earl.'

'Maud!'

‘Madeleine! Don’t stare at me as if you had a poker down your back. You know you love him.’

‘Love him, when I’ve seen him once, and spoken to him a dozen words!’

‘Well, perhaps the word’s a trifle strong, though love’s not a plant of such slow growth as you pretend. At any rate you like him, yes, already, and with that sort of liking which one finds it difficult to describe. Deny it if you dare.’

‘Maud, do you think it’s kind of you to talk to me like this? I’m a typist, a girl somewhere on the same level as a seamstress. I think myself lucky if I make fifteen shillings a week. My whole life has been a struggle for bread; over and over again I’ve had to do without the butter. I have never had five pounds at one time to call my own; I’ve constantly been without fivepence. Insult and contumely, work and weariness, hunger and despair—that’s the atmosphere in which I’ve lived always, month after month, year after year. Fate has drawn me out of it for an instant for a freak, a jest; but I’m returning to it now, to remain in it, with hundreds of thousands of other girls, better and cleverer than myself, until I die. And you talk to me of marrying an earl! If you consider, you will perceive why that sort of talk is apt to make one wince.’

‘You’ve been luckier than I.’

‘Miss Dorrincourt, you don’t know what you say.’

‘Do you think that having her physical needs supplied is all that a woman wants? I’ve been fed like a hog in a sty; and, like the hog, I’ve been kept in the sty—to wallow. It’s true! Never have I been treated as if I were a reasonable being, as if I had a wish or aspiration of my own worth a moment’s consideration. It has been dinned into my ear, ever since my frocks first began to come below my knees, that I was being fed and clothed, washed and tended, oiled and curled, so that, in the fulness of time, I might be brought to a fit condition to become Conrad’s wife. Mine has been a life’s imprisonment, and not a day has passed on which I have not striven to escape by beating against the doors and

windows. The only prospect in front of me is the exchange from a larger gaol into a smaller, and you think I'm to be envied! If it came to the sticking point, and I really had to choose, I'd make you stay, and I'd go out to fill your place. Outside, I might have a chance to become the mistress of my own fate; here, I'll be chained by the leg for life.'

Madeleine shook her head.

'You talk as a theorist. I repeat that you don't know what you say.'

'Then give me a chance of gaining the knowledge of which you seem so proud. Stay! and let me go! Hush! there's someone at the door again. It's Mrs Singleton come back. Who's there?'

A masculine voice replied.

'I am here. If you will turn the key, and draw the bars and bolts, and open the door, you will see who I am.'

There was a rattling of the handle, as if by way of conveying a hint that the speaker did not desire to be kept waiting. Maud turned to Madeleine with flashing eyes, speaking below her breath.

'It's Reginald Fanshawe!'

Madeleine whispered back to her.

'It's the man who discovered the imposture. You talk to me of staying; and here's the man who found out in a moment that I was nothing but a trickster, come to tax me with my trickery, and to punish me for it as I deserve.'

'Oh! that's what he's come for, is it? Then we'll show this over-clever gentleman a thing or two. You'll have to get behind that convenient curtain of yours again, my dear. Leave me to deal with Mr Fanshawe.'

She began to hurry Madeleine towards the curtain under whose cover she had been previously sheltered, Madeleine expostulating with her as she went.

'Miss Dorrincourt! Maud! do be careful what you say.'

'I'll be the most careful creature in this wide, wide world. I'll undertake, my dearest, to take the most solicitous care of your interest as well as mine.'

There came another rattling at the handle, and banging at the panel.

'Open this door.'

'Quick,' whispered Madeleine. 'Don't keep him waiting, you'll make him angry.'

'Angry,' Maud laughed; 'just as though I could find it in my heart to anger anyone.'

Very leisurely, strolling to the door, she turned the key, surveying the impatient gentleman outside with an air of calm impertinence.

'Oh! So it's you! Dear me! What a hurry you seem to be in!'

She retreated towards the centre of the room, her arms and hands kept ostentatiously behind her, and her glorious head thrown a little back; in her eyes there was the fire of battle, the glint of malice. Placing himself right in front of her, he looked her up and down—as if he were appraising her. Her bearing seemed to afford him considerable amusement.

'You carry it off uncommonly well.'

'Don't I? It's a way I have.'

'And a good way, too. Does you credit. And, pray, who may you chance to be?'

'I don't understand you.'

'No? That's odd. You don't look like a girl who was dull of comprehension. And, pray, how have you got here?'

'I understand you less than ever.'

'That's odder still. Don't let your lack of comprehension advance too fast. And, pray, where may our dear Miss Dorrincourt have gone?'

'My dear Reginald! What do you mean?'

'Reginald!' He laughed. 'Your dear Reginald! Do you always address men by their Christian names when first you meet them!'

'Reginald, are you mad?'

He laughed again. Seating himself in an arm-chair, crossing his legs, clasping his hands behind his head, he looked up at her with a smile which was hardly intended to be flattering.

'What is the solution of your little puzzle? Has the dear Maud gone too far—at last—with her Bianchi; has he gone too far with his dear Maud, or is she off on some new caper of her own? I know that she's been missing for the last two days, being better posted in such matters than you suppose. I was considering whether it was not my bounden duty to advise her grandmother of her curious absence; but your appearance on the scene has a little floored me. Whose idea are you? Singleton's? If so, the old woman is cleverer than I believed.'

'I am waiting, my dear Reginald, to see if there is some glimmer of reason in your new madness?'

'You're smart, uncommonly. And you're like her, remarkably. The ordinary observer you'd deceive at sight; in fact, you have deceived the others. They all suppose you to be the genuine Maud; Conrad, in particular, you seem to have filled with a sort of holy joy. But I'm not quite so easily taken in; I spotted you at once. Your hair is like in colour, though I fancy it's been dyed to sample, it looks a trifle dark about the roots. But your head is not shaped like Maud's, and you're a trifle shorter, and a trifle stouter, though I see you've squeezed yourself into another of her frocks. Before and beyond all else you lack her hoity-toity, I'm-the-queen-of-the-castle sort of pose, that is inimitable; and the more I look at you the more obvious the dissimilarities become. Still, it's a fair likeness, that I'll own.'

Maud sat down. She crossed her legs, clasped her hands behind her back, looked at him, and smiled.

'My dear Reginald, now that you seem to have paused to take a little breath, may I ask what your presence here, and this burst of eloquence, may mean.'

'The bluff won't score. It's spotted. The game's exposed. I'm a player myself.'

'You're a player? What at?' She tapped her foot impatiently against the floor. 'Will you tell me? What do you mean?'

He rose from his chair.

'You know very well what I mean; after all, your methods are only elementary. Do you think that I

don't know that you're no more Maud Dorrincourt than I am? My dear girl, do you take me for a fool?'

She also rose.

'Reginald Fanshawe, have you really gone stark, staring mad?'

'Bah! Give it up! You really carry the thing too far! In a hundred ways the game's shown up. The more I look at you the more I wonder how ever anyone could be deceived, quite apart from that tell-tale hand.'

'My hand? What is the matter with my hand?'

She held out her hands in front of her, first one and then the other, with an air of the most innocent surprise.

'There's nothing the matter with it as a hand; but, unfortunately, there's something missing from it as the hand of the lady you're supposed to be—a certain ring from the third finger of the left!'

'A ring? Do you mean my mother's ring, Reginald? You must be mad!'

She held the hand in question out in front of her, as if astonished beyond measure. He stared at her.

'Why, what the devil! There's some trickery! It wasn't there just now!'

'It wasn't there just now? My mother's ring? It's never left my finger since it was first put on; you couldn't get it off unless you took my finger with it. Is that the explanation of your extraordinary behaviour in the music room? I wondered what it meant. Whatever made you think it wasn't on my finger?'

'Because it wasn't; it was not on the finger of the girl who was in the music room, that I'll swear. There's some infernal jugglery! You may be Maud Dorrincourt—now that I look at you closely, I believe you are.'

'Do you? Really?'

'But the girl in the music room was someone who was impersonating you.'

'Impersonating me!' She assumed an air of ineffable scorn. 'And do you dare to pretend that there is any creature living who could successfully impersonate me? You must be mad. I'll tell this to grandmamma, and Conrad, and the rest of them. They'll be amused to

hear that your latest vagary is to suspect me of pretending to be myself. Who's that ?'

'This was in response to another tapping at the door.

'It's I, Conrad. If you are disengaged, there is something which I should like to say to you.'

She turned to Reginald.

'Did you lock the door ?'

'I did. I didn't wish our interview to be untowardly interrupted.'

'How dare you !'

As she moved away from her he caught her by the wrist.

'Don't you make any mistake, that there's some manœuvre afloat I am persuaded. I smell it in the air. But, whether or no, there are certain passages in your life with which I have a closer acquaintance than you imagine ; you sha'n't marry Conrad, and so I warn you.'

'No ?'

'No, a thousand times no, and a thousand times again !'

'And what will you do to prevent me ?'

'Do ! Why, I'd sooner marry you myself !' He broke into sudden heat. 'Don't pretend to misunderstand me, Maud ; you know I love you a hundredfold better than ever Conrad can ; you know there is nothing a man can do I wouldn't do for you ; you know—hang you, you cat !'

The quick change in the tenor of his observations was due to Maud's having slipped from his grasp, and, by her manipulation of the electric button, having plunged the room into utter darkness. In an instant she had rushed to Madeleine behind the curtain ; they could hear him groping about, laughing to himself unmirthfully, as in the enjoyment of a disagreeable joke.

'Madeleine, I'm not going to risk a *tête-à-tête* with Milord of Staines, that's not in my line. You'll have to do the talking to him ; you'll do it better than I shall !'

'Maud, I can't !'

'But, my dear, you must ! and will ! and shall ! So out you come, I'm going to do the hiding now.'

‘Maud!’

But there was none that answered her imploring, her piteous, her frightened whisper. Maud had vanished; whither, in the darkness, she could not tell.

Reginald, who at last had reached the door, threw it open. Madeleine, from where she stood, could see the Earl in the corridor without. The brothers eyed each other without much show of geniality. Reginald’s tone, though soft enough, was distinctly intended to be unpleasant.

‘Hello, Conrad, is that you? I do hope we haven’t kept you waiting.’

Nor was the other’s voice, in reply, unduly suggestive of brotherly love.

‘What have you been doing in there with Maud that it was necessary that the door should be locked?’

‘What the deuce has that to do with you? How fond you are of prying. You’d better ask Maud; perhaps she’ll tell you.’

With a laugh which was meant to irritate, he strolled away. The Earl came into the room. As he did so the electric light was re-connected, once more the room was all aglow. Taking it for granted that this was owing to Maud, Madeleine looked round in search of her, but she was nowhere to be seen. If Madeleine could trust the evidence of her senses, the Earl and she were alone in the room together.

Madeleine, who was standing just where Maud had hurried her, willy-nilly, out of her hiding-place, still retained in her hand a fold of the curtain. It seemed to her that her heart was beating unnaturally fast. There was a booming noise in her head. The room swam before her eyes. Her limbs quivered. The sudden rush of events had overtaxed her strength. Maud’s action in thrusting her forward at such a moment, in such a manner, without consulting her, without the slightest warning, seemed to have startled the life right out of her; her mysterious disappearance had been the final straw.

The Earl mistook the cause of her obvious distress.

‘Maud!’ he exclaimed. ‘What has he been saying to you? What has he done?’

Madeleine, all trembling, clutching the curtain with convulsive fingers, staggered back against the wall.

He dashed eagerly forward, knocking over in his haste a small table which stood unnoticed in the way. As this table fell, something rolled off it on to the ground, something which looked like a small celluloid ball. As this ball touched the floor there was a flash of light, a thick smoke, and the sound of a loud explosion.

One of those messengers of death, which are not among the least curious of the products of modern science, had been introduced into the room. All unwittingly the man, whose one desire had been to convey peace and comfort to the frightened girl, had given it an opportunity to deliver its message.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE WOOING

MADELEINE woke as from a dream. Her senses seemed to have taken to themselves wings. She knew not where she was. It was as if there was a weight upon her eyes, so that she could not open them. What was that which touched her lips, again and again—so warmly, yet so softly? With an effort, which appeared to her to be of strange magnitude, she induced her eyelids to uncloseth—for a moment, and then they shut again.

But in that second she saw, as in a glass darkly, a face looking down into hers—the face of a man. Whose face was it? whose could it be? she wondered, in the curious confusion of her intellect. And what was it doing so close to hers? And why did its near neighbourhood convey to her so odd a sense of satisfaction and of ease?

Once more the something soft, yet warm, came in contact with her lips—again; and again. A quiver went all over her; a flash of illumination. The man whose face was looking down at hers was kissing her. In the sudden shock of her surprise, her eyes flashed themselves wide open. In an instant she was caught up in a strenuous grasp; kisses were rained upon her lips, and cheeks, and eyes, and brow, and hair. A voice exclaimed, half choked by its own eagerness,—

‘My love! my dear! my darling! Thank God! I thought that you were dead! God forgive me, sweet, for thinking so! To see your eyes again—oh, to see them, dear!’

Never before had she been conscious of so peculiar a sensation, of such mastering exhilaration, of such a sudden, simultaneous flow of hot and eager blood through all her veins. Her eyes closed, flooded by tears which had in them no bitterness. Her cheeks burned. Her lips parted. Her breath came quicker. Her frame thrilled with a new, a vivid, a penetrating rapture.

Then followed the reaction.

On a sudden she remembered all that had happened—with flaming clearness. How Maud had vanished; how the Earl had come into the room; how she had shrunk away from him; how he had rushed forward, and how the explosion had followed. Then she knew that she was lying on the floor; and that the Earl of Staines held her in his arms. That it was he who had kissed her; who had addressed her with such impassioned words. 'Oh! oh!' she cried. 'What have I done?'

She tried to rise, but he would not let her, continuing to hold her fast.

'Done, my darling? You've done nothing. Tell me, are you badly hurt?'

'Hurt? I'm not hurt. Why should I be hurt?' The memory of the explosion came back to her, to fill her with a new, an instant fear. 'And you—are you hurt?'

'My darling! No, I'm not hurt. I'm a little scorched, I think, but nothing more.'

'Scorched!' In a moment she was out of his arms—in spite of him. Kneeling on the floor at his side, she gazed eagerly at him. 'Why, you're all burnt! Your poor, poor face!'

In her voice there seemed to be a throb of pain.

'Sweetheart! Why, it's nothing. And, if it were, I'd be burnt again, and again, and again, to have you speak to me like that. Better than any oil or ointment is the music of your words.'

He stretched out his arms and put them round her, and drew her to him, she offering no resistance. She could have offered none even had she wished; and she

did not wish. It was as though she was under a spell. She suffered him to pillow her head upon his breast; to press his lips against her brow.

‘Your poor, poor face!’ was all she said.

And he replied,—

‘After all these years!’

And they were still.

She was more than half afraid. It seemed to her that in the whole business there was something supernatural. In her excited condition it was, to her, almost as if they had been drawn together by the hand of God. They had been so near to death together, that their late propinquity in the Valley of the Shadow seemed to apply, also, now that once more they were standing at the Gates of Life. And although he was but the chance acquaintance of, as it were, a miraculous moment, in some strange fashion it seemed to her that she had known him all her life; as though his spirit, if not his body, had kept step with her steps from the beginning unto now. So that she, who, as a rule, with strangers, more especially when they were masculine, was reserve itself, was content to continue in this strange man’s arms, as if the position was a matter of course, and, from all time, hers of right. It was, indeed, as if she had come into her own at last.

It was he who broke the silence.

‘Experimenting again with things that go off?’

‘I! What do you mean?’

‘Haven’t you been exploring in the caves where Nature keeps her secrets? Isn’t it to that we owe this illustration?’

She raised herself out of his arms.

‘Do you think I have had anything to do—with what has happened?’

He eyed her as if puzzled.

‘Then,’ he knitted his brow, ‘is it possible—do you suspect—can Reginald have had a finger in the thing?’

She shrank away.

‘I do not know.’

‘Maud! My darling! If he has, I’ll call him to

account for it, though he were twenty times my brother.'

'He has not hurt us—very much.'

'That is true. Perhaps he only meant to frighten us. I wonder what was in the thing. His jokes are apt to have rather a peculiar flavour. Perhaps this was meant for one of them. Hurt us! So far as I'm concerned, he's done me the best service in his power, he's brought you close to me at last. My darling! do you know that in some strange way you seem to have all at once become more beautiful? As if you had become etherealised—passed through the cleansing fires, and left behind in them the grosser vapours. You have become sweeter, gentler, tenderer—a new Maud. It's the latest and the loveliest edition I am holding to my heart.'

Again he took her in his arms and drew her to him, and again she suffered him, silently, all quivering. As he kissed her all her pulses seemed to bound. He whispered in her ear,—

'Tell me that you're happy.'

She answered him in a voice that was tremulous and dry, as if it proceeded with difficulty from her throat.

'Yes—I am happy.'

As he showered on her his rapturous embraces she shut her eyes, shivering with an ecstasy which was akin to pain.

'This seems to be a case in which two are company and three are none.'

Someone said this while still he was in the very middle of his wooing. In a moment the proceedings ceased. He was on his knees, and Madeleine, loosed, was scrambling to her feet. The Countess of Staines stood in the open doorway, her either hand resting on a silver-handled stick. With her withered frame, bent double, clad in a vivid blue silk dress of some unknown style and shape, which was much too large for her, she looked like one of the old-time witches brought to life again. Her enormous head, which was over big for what was left of her body, hung forward, as if in her shrivelled neck there was not strength enough to hold it

up. Her face, which was a maze of deep-ploughed wrinkles, spoke of age which was very far beyond the Psalmist's allotted span. It was only when one perceived the eyes which glowered from beneath the penthouse of the overhanging brows that one began to understand how it was that so striking an example of decrepitude came to have life in her at all.

It was the eyes which gave away the secret; which told of unbending resolution, indomitable will; which proclaimed the determination to cling on to existence until, even in the owner's judgment, it was no longer worth the having. The two gleaming orbs revealed the mystery of the woman's strength; they suggested the vitality of twenty, linked to a knowledge of the world's wickedness through all the generations that have been. When one encountered them they conveyed the impression that this ancient female had lived, and did live, and would live, with one end constantly in view—to have her own way in large things as in small, and woe betide whoever should venture to say her nay.

'Grandmother!' exclaimed the Earl, following Madeleine's example by springing to his feet. 'And alone! Have you come here from your room all alone?'

The old lady looked at him as some old bird might regard an impertinent youngster; her voice had in it a rusty quality; it creaked as if her throat required oiling.

'Why not? Once I could walk as well as you, and better. I can walk now when I choose. And I have chosen. Who's forbidding me? I'd a fancy to come and see Maud, thinking to take her unawares. But it seems that you have been in front of me. I'd no notion you would be her visitor.'

The Earl, advancing, offered his arm to lead her into the room. She would have none of him. Wagging her ancient head, she hobbled forward by the aid of her two sticks. He hastened to place a chair for her in a convenient position. Before, however, she would seat herself, she looked about her round the room.

'This is a mad room of yours, my girl. Fitter for dying in than living.'

Madeleine was silent, not having the faintest notion what to say, feeling hardly qualified to criticise the absent owner's notions of upholstery.

The old lady fixed on her her glowing eyes.

'Don't you hear what I am saying? Why don't you speak when you are spoken to?'

'I'm sorry you don't like it,' murmured Madeleine.

The Countess seemed to be as little pleased with her speech as with her silence.

'You're uncommonly mild upon a sudden. Why don't you tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about, and proceed to teach your grandmother, as is your general way?'

The Earl, noting the girl's confusion, endeavoured to divert the Countess's attention.

'Come, grandmother, here's a chair for you. Hadn't you better sit?'

The old lady turned on him.

'I'll sit down when I choose, and not before, my man. Do you think that I've no legs of my own to stand on? You're a fool if you do.'

But, in spite of her words, she accepted the seat he proffered, leaning right forward the better to glare at Madeleine.

'There's a change come in you somewhere, girl. I am trying to make out just what it is. I saw it in the music room, but I can see it plainer now. What's troubled you?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing!' She mimicked the girl's stammering intonation. 'What's come to your voice and to your insolence? You look—and sound—as if you'd changed your nature between the evening and the morning. What's happened to her, Staines?'

'Something has happened which will give you pleasure; almost as much pleasure as it has given me. She has engaged herself to be my wife.'

The blood rushed to the girl's face; she trembled with so much violence that she could hardly stand. The old lady regarded her intently.

‘So! Has she indeed? Say that again.’

Going to Madeleine the Earl slipped his arm through hers.

‘She has yielded to my prayers at last, and made of me the happiest man alive.’

‘And where’s her happiness?’

‘We share our happiness—don’t we, Maud?’

The girl was dumb.

‘Is that so? Then, by the look of it, you’ve got her share as well as yours.’

His voice, sinking, was intended to reach her ears alone.

‘That’s not so, Maud, is it? Don’t be afraid, my darling, say it isn’t so?’

But the girl, trembling on his arm, was still. The old lady resented his endeavour to appeal to the girl’s private feelings.

‘Speak up, man! Let’s hear what you say. Don’t prompt her to tell lies. Has the girl gone dumb? Are you ill?’

‘No; I am not ill.’

‘What ails you, then? Are you afraid?’

‘No; I am not afraid.’

‘You look as if you were, which is something new in you, you being, as a rule, a bundle of forward insolence. Is it true what Staines says. Have you promised to be his wife?’

‘No; I don’t think I’ve promised.’

‘She doesn’t think. In Heaven’s name, girl, aren’t you sure? Wasn’t he kissing you when I came in?’

‘Yes; I think he was?’

‘She thinks! again! What’s happened to the girl? Can she do nothing else but think?’

The Earl interposed.

‘I should have told you, grandmother, that an accident which occurred just before you came has tried Maud’s nerves.’

‘What was the accident?’

‘Something exploded. As you see, it has scorched my face, and startled Maud.’

The old lady kept her gleaming eyes fixed persistently on Madeleine's countenance, surveying her for a moment or two in silence. When she spoke, there was a grimness in her grating tones.

'Come close, girl, and let me look at you. If this mysterious accident of which Staines talks has not completely shattered your nervous system, which I had not supposed an easy thing to do, I take it you can answer a straight question straightly.'

Madeleine did as she was bid, bracing herself as best she could to enable herself to bear the further strain which she saw was coming.

'I would rather you did not question me just now.'

'You would rather? But I choose. I've been talking to Singleton—inquiring, since I've seen so little of you of late, what it is you say to her, and with what sort of occupations you employ your time. Precious little information I have gained. If she's to be believed, she knows as little as I. My patience, of which I'd never overmuch, is wearing thin. The days are fading. I fade, too. For me the end of days is near at hand. It's time that Staines was married, and I'm resolved he shall be before I go. Who marries him takes all I have, and my blessing on the top of it. Is it you he is to marry, or shall it be another?'

Madeleine pressed her finger-tips into the palms of her hands, striving to hold herself as with a tight rein.

'I have told you that I would rather you did not question me just now.'

'Who cares what you would rather—and how long have you been singing me that song? I'll play with you no more at waiting; it's a game at which you're like to win. Come, girl, don't pretend to be a lackadaisical fool, I'll swear that you're not that. Didn't I see him kissing you just now?'

'Yes.'

'And was he not doing it with your goodwill?'

'Ye-es.'

'And would you let any man kiss you who'd a mind to do it?'

‘No!’

The ‘No’ came clearly,

‘Why, then, the thing is settled. If you like him well enough to let him use you as he was using you just now, why won’t you say, straight out, that you will marry him?’

‘I dare not.’

‘You dare not! What, afraid of Staines? Then you’re the first that ever was. He’ll make you as good a husband as woman ever had—why should you be afraid to marry him?’

In reply, Madeleine put up her hands to hide her cheeks. The old lady turned to her grandson in stupefied amazement.

‘Staines, what’s the matter with the girl? For Maud Dorrincourt to try to veil her blushes is something new—she! the most brazen hussy that ever yet I met!’

The Earl himself seemed puzzled. He looked at the hard-driven Madeleine as if he could not make her out, with, in his glance, a wealth of love and longing which became him very well. Then, going closer to her, he began to address her in a voice which the strength of his emotion made dangerously persuasive to the girl’s bewildered ears. Struggle against the feeling as she might, his words, coming from his heart, brought peace to hers, and inclined her irresistibly towards him.

‘Why dare you not? What is it that makes you tremble at the thought that I should call you wife? Is it because you fear that my love for you is not enough? That cannot be. You know that there’s but one woman in the world for me; and were you without a penny, or the hope of ever having one, you are the only woman I would marry. No matter what others say, if you’ll not have me I’ll die a bachelor. Of that you may be sure. I cannot doubt but that you know. I’m of the constant kind—or is it you’re afraid your love for me’s too little? I cannot think that either, after what chanced just now. My arms still glow where they held you trembling; my heart still throbs, because it felt yours bounding; my lips still burn, because you set them in

a flame. It's not in nature for a woman to be unto a man as, a minute back, you were to me, unless she loves him. Are you frightened because your own heart tells you this as plainly as mine tells me? Why, then, let me give you a continual courage in the same fashion in which I endowed you with it for a time—with my arms about you, dear.'

Regardless of the old woman's great, gleaming eyes, he went closer still, and closer, till his arms stole round her waist; and again she suffered him.

'My dear! my sweet! my love! Pillow your head against my breast, and pray God with me that He may bless us, and keep us side by side together until life closes.'

And she obeyed. She laid her glorious head against his breast—having to stoop to do it—and sobbed dry-eyed. He smoothed the radiant splendour of her hair, consoling her as if she was some frightened child.

'Ssh, ssh! Don't tremble so, sweetheart; you're in safe keeping. He who holds you fast loves you better than his life.'

The Countess, her long, pointed chin poised pendulous between the yellow, claw-like hands, which still clutched at the silver-handled sticks, sat still and watched them, breaking the silence with a creaking sound which perhaps was meant for laughter.

'Come, this is better, Now, girl, let's have no more shilly-shallying. Billing and cooing is more in your way, that's plain. Why you've not been at it long ago is beyond my comprehension. Now you've got so far, we'll lose no time in getting you a trifle further. The betrothal we will have to-morrow, and we'll have as many there to witness it as can be gathered in the time; they'll need no pressing, I'll be bound! All things shall be done in due and proper form, as befits your rank and dignity—and mine. This shall be no match made behind a hedge, and ratified in the first dry ditch. It shall be the marriage of the season—ay, of many seasons. The greatest noble in the land—you're that, Staines, I protest it!—is to be married to

the richest and loveliest maid the world can find. That you're the loveliest maid, girl, you need no telling; you've vanity enough for ten. As for riches, I'm richer even than you think. I've that to give you which shall make those Yankee women feel they're poor. On your wedding day it shall all be yours—all—all!

'And the fame of the marriage shall go out to the four quarters of the globe. Princes shall be there, and princesses shall look on you with envy. I'll spend a fortune on the wedding—I've put it aside, and planned it—ah! never mind how many years. The tale of it shall be in people's mouths to tell to their children's children. I'd have done it for your mother, girl, had she had more sense; but I'll do it for you instead, since you have shown yourself to be the wiser. It hasn't spoiled for the keeping.—So, Singleton, they've made a match of it at last, these turtle-doves of ours. Yes, Singleton, now they're turtle-doves; look at them, and see. Don't they bear it on their faces? Why, you old fool, what is it you're staring at like that? Isn't it time the match was made?'

While the old lady had been haranguing in a wild, inflated fashion, which seemed singularly out of keeping with her appearance, another listener had appeared upon the scene. While the attention of the others had been absorbed in the ancient Dowager's declamation, Mrs Singleton had entered, unobserved, in the very midst of it, to find Madeleine still enfolded in the Earl's embrace, and the Countess crowing stridently over the realisation of her long-cherished dreams. Mrs Singleton started back, amazed, bewildered, wondering confusedly to what new tragedy the scene might be the prelude. It was while she still gaped, open-eyed and open-mouthed, that the Countess turned and saw her.

To the Dowager's first not over civil inquiry, Mrs Singleton was dumb; the Countess, quickly losing patience, striking her sticks against the floor with as much violence as she was capable of, assailed her with a shower of vituperation.

'Ass! idiot! fool! Don't you hear what I am saying? Don't you hear what I am saying? Don't stand there like a stuck pig, staring. I tell you that they've made a match of it at last.'

Madeleine, aroused to the fact of Mrs Singleton's appearance, started guiltily from the Earl's alluring arms. Her blood turned from hot to cold. Her cheeks went white. Her first impulse was to throw herself at the Countess's feet and confess the imposition which had been practised. But she was stayed by Mrs Singleton's stammering reply.

'Yes, your ladyship, I hear you.'

The dowager raged hotly back at her.

'You hear me? Is that all you have to say? Did you not advise me, not an hour ago, not to put pressure on the girl, for it would do no good? It's done this much good that it's done the business. They're to be wed, and the betrothal's for to-morrow.'

'To-morrow—the betrothal! So soon!'

The Countess, half raising herself from her seat, shook her saffron-coloured hands in the air in a burst of unbecoming passion.

'So soon! So soon! What do you call so soon? Why, you smooth-faced cat, you've been against me in the business all along. I've suspected it; I've smelt it; now it's plain. There's always been the twang of the liar at the tip of your slippery tongue. But I'll tell you, my cunning Singleton, that if the girl has not been publicly betrothed by to-morrow about this time, if any hitch comes in—I don't care what, I'll have no more of your shilly-shallying, or hers!—out into the street you go, and she goes after you, and my curse with her. What she stands up in, that she shall have for her own, and nothing more. I'll never look upon your face again, or hers. She shall die in a ditch as her mother did, and be buried in a pauper's grave.'

Mrs Singleton visibly trembled.

'But I assure your ladyship that you mistake me.'

'Mistake you? Yes, I've mistaken you before—for a decent and an honest creature. But you've never

deceived me quite. Singleton, I believe that not a little of the evil that has come upon my house has come through you. You incited the mother to rebel, and now, if you could, you'd incite the daughter too. But a change has come over the girl—little thanks, I'll be sworn, to you. She's a new creature. She's shown more sense to-day than in the whole of her life before. Be you careful not to undo what has been done, or there'll be rue to wear. It's a mistake to keep old servants who've a taste for sharpening their pet claws upon your skin.'

Mrs Singleton stood in front of the furious harridan, abashed, confounded, in evident perplexity what to do or say. Madeleine, with white, drawn face, and distended, frightened eyes, was plainly more bewildered even than the over-zealous woman who was the primary cause of the dilemma in which she found herself. The Earl put out his hand to her with a gesture of half-humorous, half-affectionate entreaty. But Madeleine paid no heed. For the moment, at any rate, the Countess was mistress of the situation.

While the spirit of indecision was still in the air, and no one seemed to have anything with which to answer the voluble dowager, Lady Hildegarde Fanshawe came bustling in. The high-pitched tones of her metallic voice were in disagreeable consonance with the old lady's angry croaking.

'Mother! You here! I've been looking for you everywhere. And Conrad! Why, what's happening?'

The Countess turned to her.

'This is happening—the girl and Staines have come to a point at last; they're to be man and wife; the betrothal's for to-morrow.'

'Mother!'

The Lady Hildegarde started, as if not altogether agreeably surprised.

'The girl's all changed; she's become as soft as butter, and sugar sweet. Staines has not only won her hand, he's won her heart as well, with—as I have seen with my own eyes—the freehold of her lips. It seems, after

all, that the match was made in Heaven ; all the bells will ring in tune. There's going to be a wedding which will set all the gossips clacking wherever there's a tongue to wag. Hilda, give me your arm ; and, Conrad, give me yours. There are matters of which I wish to speak to you. Singleton, we leave the lady in your kind keeping. Be careful to bear well in mind wherein the truest kindness lies.'

The Countess passed out of the room, with the Lady Hildegarde holding her up on one side, and the Earl upon the other. They could hear her tongue still going vigorously as she hobbled along the corridor.

Madeleine and Mrs Singleton were alone together.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAY TO THE DOOR

‘WELL? You see? It has come to this!’

The elder woman did not at once reply. She stood listening to the trio receding along the corridor, her face averted. The sound of the Countess’s croaking became fainter and fainter. When she deemed it prudent, and that neither of the three was likely to return, she closed the door. Then she turned to Madeleine, who repeated what she had previously said,—

‘You see? It has come to this!’

The girl’s face was set and stern. She stood upright, her head a little back, her hands close to her sides, in the attitude of one who stands at bay. There was an expression in her eyes which the other had not seen in them before, a something almost threatening.

On Mrs Singleton’s countenance, on the contrary, there was a look of terror, desperation, almost of despair. The cheeks seemed to have fallen in, the wrinkles were accentuated. She was older, haggarder. Her voice was slightly husky.

‘But I don’t understand. How did it happen?’

‘Because you brought me here to act the lie. So it happened.’

‘But, my dear’—she put her hand up to her brow wearily—‘it’s beyond all thinking. How came you to commit yourself in such a fashion with the Earl?’

‘I wonder! I could kill myself and you when I think of it. I had rather have died a thousand deaths than you had brought me to this shame. It is as though you had set yourself to wreck me body and soul.’

She spoke with a quietness which lent her words more weight than clamour could have done. They seemed to cut her listener to the heart. Mrs Singleton began to wring her hands.

‘My dear, my dear! You must not talk like that. I did it for the best.’

‘The best for you, for me, or for whom? Did you stop to think of the ordeal to which you were subjecting me, or did you think it didn’t matter in dragging me from the streets into a palace to be wooed by such a man?’

‘My dear, I never dreamt he’d woo you. It passes my comprehension how it all has come about. It’s so unlike the Earl—he and Miss Maud are always at arm’s length.’

‘You forget that I am not Miss Maud.’

Mrs Singleton sighed.

‘On my word, I’m almost beginning to wish you were. It’d help clear away a maze of troubles. The Earl seems to get on with you so much better than with her.’

‘Is that meant for a reproach?’

‘My dear, how quick you are! Nothing was further from my mind. But come, it’s no use for you and I to talk to each other in this way. What’s done’s done. You’ll find that a way will be shown us. And, whatever comes, you’ll have no cause to regret the part you’ve played, of that I’m sure. I only hope and pray that when Miss Maud does return she’ll make herself as agreeable to them all as you have done.’

‘As I have done!’

The girl’s tone rang with bitter self-contempt.

‘You have done more to win their hearts in a few hours than Miss Maud in all her life.’

‘You talk nonsense.’

‘Well, my dear, if you choose to think so, why, then, you must. I am expecting to have news from Singleton every minute. God grant it may be good news. I tremble to think of what that wrong-headed child in her folly may have done. It’s so cruel, and yet so like her, to have gone away, God alone knows where, without a word of any sort to me.’

When the old lady had gone—in search of the food of which the girl was standing very heartily in need—Madeleine began an instant examination of the walls. Her first thought was to discover Maud, or to communicate with her somehow in her hiding-place. Exactly where or how she had vanished, she had not a notion. She tried to think. She herself had been beside the curtain, she placed herself in her former position; then the lights went out, and when they reappeared Maud had gone. She felt sure that she had disappeared on the same side of the room on which she had herself been standing—on the left. It was on that side, right up at the other end, Maud had first appeared.

She examined it closely.

Not a hint could she discover of any hidden entrance. The wall behind the gorgeous hangings was of wood, carved in wondrous arabesques, it seemed a sin to screen it. Amid such a profusion of bewildering design, in a hundred places a spring might be concealed. It might take years to find it, and then an indefinite period to discover how to put it into motion. Even supposing that the way to the secret chamber was through the wall, which she had no reason to suppose, Madeleine recognised that she might as well look for the needle in the haystack as seek to find it out.

And yet how she longed to speak to her, to pour out her heart to her, to tell her of the plight in which she stood, to appeal to her to help her out of the morass in which her feet were sinking. She felt that if she could only reach that beautiful and brilliant creature whom God, in his inscrutable wisdom, had made so marvellously in her own image, her glorified self, that all would yet be well, and the complications and difficulties which encompassed her, weighing her down, would vanish as by the touch of a magician's wand.

If she could only manage to let her hear her voice!

How did she know how close she was? She might be, quite possibly she was, within a hand's breadth; a well-directed whisper might reach her ears.

She started to try, placing her lips against the wall, beginning with the very faintest whisper.

‘Maud! Maud! Maud! It is I, Madeleine! Maud, speak to me!’

If Maud heard, she gave no sign. The girl, moving further along the wall, tried again. She shifted from place to place, and tried at each. Then, when her whispers remained unnoticed, she raised her voice, higher and higher.

‘Maud! Maud! Speak to me, Maud!’

She cried in vain. There was none that answered. The wall sounded solid wherever she struck it with her fist, seeming to throw her voice straight back at her.

But she did not relinquish her efforts until Mrs Singleton reappeared, bearing food with her own hands. The girl ate heartily, urged thereto by unromantic hunger. It was the first good meal she had had, she did not know since when—for days. She had been without the means with which to buy herself a plate of meat. The good food and the wine which Mrs Singleton pressed upon her had on her unaccustomed frame a somnolent effect. Very soon—she herself knew scarcely how it came about—she was lying, like some tired child, between the sheets of Maud Dorrincourt’s bed.

This, in a material sense, was the strangest experience of all. Her bedroom was a tiny garret, her bed a mattress laid upon the floor, her bedclothes just whatever she could find to cover her. And now she lay on what seemed to her a bed of down poised in the air, so that it yielded caressingly to every movement of her dainty limbs; between sheets of gossamer fineness which it was a luxury to feel against her silken skin. She realised these things with a sigh of perfect satisfaction, yet with a half-conscious, curious conviction that this was only as it ought to be, that they were hers by right. As if this was the inheritance to which she had been born, and from which she had been kept out unto this hour.

But, though her couch was soft, she could not sleep. Indeed, as soon as she was snug and comfortable, sleep went farther and farther from her. In the darkness the

events of the day, with their amazing kaleidoscopic transmutations, passed before her eyes like ghosts that haunted her.

And before and beyond and above all else, she saw one face—a man's. Not handsome. Square and serious ; dark skinned ; with a sad mouth—and yet with something strong and tender about it, too ; dark eyes, which looked into hers with a meaning which she longed to, yet dared not, understand. It was the face of Conrad, Earl of Staines. As she thought of the passages she had had with him, she went all hot and cold, and, alone there in the darkness though she was, she put up her hands to hide her face.

What was the matter with her? Had she gone stark mad in the course of a single day? Had the man cast on her a spell that she should quiver, as she was quivering now, merely at the thought of him, and he as far above her, and as much beyond her reach, as the stars in the sky? She must have lost her senses, she told herself, or she would not recall with such rapturous delight the pressure of his lips to hers ; she would not thrill with ecstasy at the recollection of how he had held her in his arms. He had told her that he loved her, had addressed her in terms of tenderness ; burning tears of rapture welled up into her happy eyes.

But at the thought of it she burst into a flame of passion ; he had done these things to her because he mistook her for another.

Yes, the thing was true. The shame of it ! He had embraced and fondled her under a complete misapprehension. What a hideous, what a contemptible, what a degraded creature she had been, to have allowed him to shower his caresses upon one woman supposing her to be another. She did not see the humour of the thing at all ; she was in no mood to perceive the ridiculous, even though it struck her in the face. The only thing she saw was the shame of it—the shame ! When he came to hear the truth, what would he not think of her?

The horror of the thought !

The endearments which he had lavished upon her had been intended for Maud Dorrincourt!

She sat up in bed, stretched out her arms in front of her, clenched her fists, pressed her teeth together, and—hated the girl for whom she had been mistaken. She herself, was she not as good? Fresh from the work-room, trained in necessity's hard school, inured to poverty, accustomed to eat what she herself had earned and paid for; always on the border line which divides the continually starving from the often hungry. What was she the worse? Had she ever done aught of which she had righteous cause to be ashamed? Had she ever dabbled even the tips of her fingers in the waters of ignominy in which so many women in her position were wont to plunge? Never! She was as true, as sweet, as pure as any woman of them all who had been cradled in satin and clad in shining raiment. As beautiful—ay, and as queenly. Had they themselves not said unwittingly that she was an improvement on the absent Maud—more feminine, fitter to sit in the seats of the highest? And he—had he not dilated on the change for the better which had taken place in her, avowed that his love had been new born—with her?

She shook as with the palsy. Again she covered her face with her hands. What use this rhodomontade, this quibbling with facts, this confusing of clear issues? The plain truth was, she was an impostor.

She got out of bed, a confused whirl of unreasoning, febrile, frenzied jealousy, self-loathing, shame. Falling on her knees, pillowing her face on the silken coverlet, she broke into a torrent of prayer to God; telling Him all the tale, bringing it all to Him, revelling in that fulness of confession in which so many over-burdened women have found the way to peace. She threw herself upon His mercy, besought His guidance, entreating Him to point out certainly, surely, the path she ought to tread.

In that moment of cerebral exaltation it seemed to her that her prayer was heard—and answered. Presently she stood up calmer, if not more contented. Her

resolution was arrived at. She turned on the electric light, glanced round the room, went to a mirror, looking at herself in the great sheet of silvered glass, blushing with half-shamed consciousness that she made a picture well worth looking at. She had noted where Mrs Singleton had placed her clothes, and found them neatly arranged in a corner of a huge wardrobe in which there was a bewildering array of lovely garments. She cast on these a lingering glance; probably there was not one there which had not cost more than she could earn in a year. And there were dozens.

Her own clothes were poor; they looked poorer still in comparison. Her stockings, originally common enough, had been darned and darned again. The cheap, shapeless boots had been patched already; they needed further cobbling. And her linen— As she thought of the radiant products of the finest looms which had clothed her limbs that day, she bit her lips, and seemed to shrivel up, and to become a smaller and a smaller thing as she put herself into the coarse, discoloured, time-worn trumpery which was all that she could call her own.

Attired in her shabby old black frock, her faded jacket, her hardly-used hat, and her apologies for gloves, she recognised, with sudden, overwhelming force, how out of place she was in that great room, what an intruder in that habitation of the rich. Suppose he could see her now, costumed as she was wont to be? God help her if he did. She told herself, with perhaps not unnatural exaggeration, that he would take her for some scouring of the streets. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

She had all that was her own; and all that was not her own she had left behind. Her adventure was at an end; her day as caliph finished.

It would be something to look back upon; a reminiscence never to be forgotten; so that she might be no worse off for it after all.

‘Be philosophical, my dear!’ she told herself, unconsciously parodying the Frenchman. ‘The monotony of

your days has been not unpleasantly disturbed. When you're back in your own life to-morrow, you'll know that you have cause for gratitude. Such adventures as these come seldom even to the adventurous—and it's little enough of the adventurer's spirit that's in you.'

She switched off the light, and, groping her way to the door, peered out into the corridor beyond.

'How dark it is! I've no notion whereabouts in the house I am, or in which direction there's a door which leads into the street. Providence must guide me. I'll try this side for luck.'

She turned to the right, keeping her hand against the wall as she went, so that she might, at least, be prepared to some extent for sudden turns. She had gone round, it seemed to her, two corridors and had reached a third, when a clock clanged through the night. It chimed the four quarters and then struck one.

'One o'clock, only? I thought it was later. Perhaps everybody hasn't gone to bed yet. I believe that in these sort of houses people stop up half the night.'

The thought stayed her. The risk of encountering some wideawake inmate of the mansion was one she had not bargained for. And yet she perceived that at that hour the thing was even probable. What should she do? Go back and wait till the night was older? She turned, intending to retrace her steps, and instantly realised that this was impossible. She was no more able to find the room she had left than the street door she was in search of. The darkness which surrounded her was like a wall on every side—already she was beginning to be in doubt whether the apartment she had quitted was behind or in front.

'This is a pleasant situation! Egyptian darkness everywhere, and not the faintest notion where I am.'

She groped her way onward, she knew not whither, pulling up just in time to prevent herself going head foremost down a flight of steps. She felt her way carefully down them, to find there were but four.

'That's one thing certain, I never went up those steps, so I must be going out a different way to the one I came.'

She reached a point at which, as she could feel by stretching out her hands, the corridor branched out to the right and left. On a sudden a light gleamed on her right—she could hear the sound of muffled footsteps. In an instant she was flying along the passage to her left. The light was coming after her; she could hear the footsteps advancing from the back. Was she being followed? She did not pause to think. She was passing a door. Without staying to consider what might be inside, turning the handle, she rushed within. Closing the door behind her, she stood listening with beating heart, suddenly becoming conscious that she had passed from Scylla to Charybdis.

She was in the music room! A lamp was lit in the organ gallery; faint notes were stealing from the instrument. The musician was holding nocturnal communion with his art. So softly were his fingers straying over the keys that her entry, even at the further end of the apartment, had diverted his attention. His quick ear had caught the opening and shutting of the door. Ceasing to play, rising from the keyboard, he advanced towards the edge of the gallery. Madeleine could see his figure clearly outlined against the lamp at his back.

He listened for a moment in silence.

‘Who’s there?’ he asked, as the silence remained unbroken. The accent was a foreigner’s. ‘Who is that down there? Who opened the door?’

He leant over the gallery as if endeavouring to pierce with his eyes the mist of the blackness. Madeleine drew herself up close against the door, straining her faculties to detect the passing of the belated wanderer who bore a light.

Bianchi, finding his inquiry unheeded, became impatient.

‘Who is it there? I heard you come in; you have not gone out again. Is it a game you play with me?’ There was none that replied. ‘You will not answer me? Good! I will come down and see who you are.’

He passed from before the light; Madeleine could see him moving towards where she knew the staircase

was. He began to descend towards her. At that moment she faintly caught the sound of footsteps passing the door without—the midnight wanderer was going by. Behind she could hear Bianchi making the best of his way towards her through the darkness, grumbling as he came. She waited as long as she dared, until, at least she hoped, the cause of her alarm had passed out of sight and hearing. Then she opened the door as quietly as she could. But the musician was quicker than she thought—and nearer. Her action was instantly detected.

‘Ah, you are still there!’

He came rushing towards her with a cry. She was through the door only just in time to shut it in his face—with something of a bang. She flew along the passage on the right—in the contrary direction to that taken by the belated straggler. Hardly had she taken half a dozen steps before Bianchi was after her.

The chase was a short one. All Madeleine’s faculties were centred in the desire to escape. She did not stop to think of the obstacles which must be avoided, of the care which was requisite to guide her steps through the unknown darkness. She just rushed on, and had not gone far before she came signally to grief—dashing against one step, and falling up the others. Possibly it was the same short flight which she had recently descended. The shock was considerable—she was not a little shaken. Before she could regain her equilibrium Bianchi was up on her.

‘Ah! you have stopped? Good! Now we shall see who you are. You wear a skirt? So you are a woman. I thought it was a woman by the way you ran. A light will show us, perhaps, a little more.’

Taking a box from his pocket he struck a vesta—Madeleine too shaken, panting, confused to make a further attempt to escape him. She turned her head away. Moved by a sudden impulse, stretching out her arm she struck the match from his fingers. It went out as it reached the floor. He clutched her by the sleeve of her jacket.

‘What did you do that for? You think I have no

more? You are mistaken, this box of mine is full. Do not do that again, or you will be sorry.'

He struck another, giving a startled exclamation as it broke into flame.

'Maud! It is you! Is it possible? My God!'

In his excitement, the second match went out. He did not attempt immediately to light another, but burst instead into a torrent of ejaculations.

'Maud! My loved one! What is it you would do? What is it has come to you? Why do you treat me in such a way? Is it that you would drive me to despair, compel me to do that which I should eternally regret? These two days I have seen and heard nothing of you—not a word, not a sign. You give me no warning that you would not come as you have been used to come, not a syllable! I eat out my heart in vain. This afternoon you scorn my poor little flower, you treat me with contempt. And then you jump over the gallery, as if I had pushed you, and frighten me out of my life. Maud, speak to me! What have I done that I should deserve from you such treatment? You know that the words of your lips are the light of my days; do not deny them to me, my beloved!'

He put his hands about her arm, as if he would draw her towards him—a disposition which she resented.

'Do not touch me! Take your hands away!'

'Maud! How can you be so hard, so cold, so cruel! If you could see what, this moment, is in my heart for you!'

'Do you hear me? remove your hand. If you don't, I shall make you.'

'You will make me!'

For response, giving herself a sudden twist, she placed her hand against whatever part of him she could reach, and pushed him from her. He remained for a second silent, apparently surprised at the treatment which he had received. When he spoke, his tone had passed from impassioned entreaty to acrid bitterness.

'So! it is to be that way. Very good; it is as well that I should understand. It is what I wish—to under-

stand. Perhaps another match may give us light upon the matter.'

He struck another, again holding it in the air. She could see that his face was distorted by passion, that his great black eyes suggested storm. He commented on what he supposed to be the singularity of her appearance.

'What is it that this means? Whose clothes have you got on? Is it a masquerade to which you go, or is it another little romance which you have on hand? Why, at this time of night, do you wear a hat and coat? and is it from a servant you have borrowed them?'

His words stung more even than he had intended—and in an unsuspected sense. Already more than sufficiently conscious of the figure which she cut, she resented his outspoken comments with unwonted heat. She stood up straight, her head went back, her eyes flashed fire.

'How dare you speak to me like that? How dare you speak to me at all?'

He laughed—mockingly.

'How dare I? That is good! Such a question! And from you! I have dared to do more than that before, much more, and at your invitation. And I will dare to do much more again, oh yes! I beg you will not doubt it.'

He lighted another match at the one which was expiring, coming closer to her so that he might regard her to more advantage. His tone and manner were intentionally insolent.

'Do you know, my beautiful, that in that costume for a masquerade you look as if you were a woman out of the street. Is that the meaning—eh?'

For the second time Madeleine struck the match out of his hand. He rushed at her, with execrations. She eluded him by springing up the stairs which were at her back, he eagerly after her. At the top she paused and turned. Throwing out her arms in front of her she caught him full in the face, and, exerting all her strength, hurled him backwards towards the foot. Down he

went, with a crash, to the bottom. Without stopping to make inquiries into any injuries which he might quite possibly have received, whirling round on her heels, she flew for her life. It was an insensate flight. She went crashing into a wall which was at the end of the passage, and, spinning confusedly round the corner, cannoned against someone whose approach had gone unnoticed. Had it not been for this someone's presence of mind she would have gone headlong to the ground. As it was, the new-comer just managed to keep her on her feet.

'Dear life!' exclaimed a laughing voice. 'Who flies like an arrow from a bow against a wall? Can it be—it can't be—yet it must be—Madeleine, is this you?'

'Yes,' groaned Madeleine. 'What's left of me'

She had blundered into Maud Dorrincourt's arms.

CHAPTER IX

A REFUGE FROM THE WORLD

MAUD continued to hold Madeleine close to her, as if she were still fearful she would fall. 'And pray, young lady, what are you doing voyaging about the house at this hour of the night? Do you know I've been looking for you for this—I don't know how long?'

'Hush! there's Mr Bianchi along the passage—I pushed him down the stairs.'

'Child!'

'He's been running after me; he thought I was you, and—I pushed him down the stairs. I didn't stop to see if he was hurt—it's so dark, and I was afraid. He may come and find us here, and—I'd rather he didn't. Oh, Maud, tell me where the door is—the door into the street, I mean—help me to get out of this dreadful house!'

'With pleasure. Nothing will give me greater satisfaction. I'll personally conduct you this very moment.'

'Maud! do you mean it?'

'As if I did not mean it! You'd better haste, or that black bogey of a Bianchi may come and find you, and he won't be grateful for your having taken him by the left leg and thrown him down those stairs. Hist! don't I hear him coming? Let's run!'

The hint was enough; they ran, Maud holding Madeleine by the hand, steering her, guiding her round corners, seeming to know her way in the darkness as well as if it had been broad day. They dashed through a door, Maud turned the key, the electric light flamed out, and Madeleine found herself back in Maud Dorrincourt's own particular apartment, the room of the purple, crimson and gold.

‘Maud, this isn’t fair! I thought you were taking me to the street door. I trusted you! It’s no good, I won’t stay, I mean to go, so don’t let there be any misunderstanding.’

‘Hark at her, the little spitfire! She’s my other self all over, even to the temper!’

‘Open the door! Let me out!’

‘Not I. I’ll quarrel with you if you like, but let you go I won’t. Do you think I’ve come, in the silent watches of the night, to look for you in your bedroom—or in mine, it’s all the same—and, when I found it empty, chased you, like some daft creature, all over this huge caravanserai of a house, with the intention of letting you through the street door when found? You’re mistaken if you do, oddly. I’ve a fish of quite another sort to fry, my dear. I’m going to do what I never thought to do to anyone. I’m going to introduce you to my *sanctum sanctorum*, my holy of holies, my refuge, wherein the world’s forgotten, if by the world I’m not forgot. I’m going to take you to my secret room, my dearest child.’

‘Thank you, but I have no wish to go. I would rather you opened the door, and let me pass.’

‘I daresay you would, but we don’t all get what we’d rather, sweetest child. When you get to my age you’ll find it out—alas! Look at her! The fury she is in!—now I’m the gentle Maud, and she’s the raging Madeleine. Now, little, little thing, be good, and come and see what may be seen.’ She slipped her arm round Madeleine’s waist, who made an impatient movement as if to shake it off again. ‘Now, there’s a naughty child! Control your angry passions, or whatever will become of you.’

Half laughing, half crying, half willing, half unwilling, Madeleine was cajoled and wheedled into allowing Maud to lead her across the room, away from the door.

‘Now keep one eye upon the wall and the other eye on me—if you can manage to do it without squinting, which I can’t abide!—and you shall behold a feat of veritable hanky-panky. Observe my hand; I wave it in the air—once, twice, thrice—thus! Graceful action, isn’t it? My dear, I am persuaded that you and I are the most graceful creatures the world can show. I bring it

against the solid wall—thus—and, behold, before my touch—my magic touch—the solid wall flies open.'

It was as she said. She did wave her hand two or three times in the air, and it was a graceful action ; and she did press her finger-tips against the solid wall, and it did fly open.

'Notice one apparent drawback ; the wall does not open quite so much as it might do. One has to stoop to enter, and a very stout person could not squeeze through.'

In point of fact, the cavity revealed by the displacement of the hidden door was under six feet in height, and less than two in width.

'Yet the drawback is rather apparent than real ; there's room for me to enter, and for you, which is the chief thing to be considered. Were the aperture larger it might be more conspicuous—which would be a pity. Do you know that you are looking at something really like a feat of hanky-panky. This wall is a good two feet thick. The door is practically part and parcel of the wall ; it's scarcely less substantial. And yet at the instant touch of my weak fingers—you see they're slender—it swings upon its hinges as lightly and as easily as if it were a feather's weight. A man who knew his business made that door, and hung it where you see it's hanging now. Go inside ; there's another little peculiarity which I wish to point out to you. There's just room in here for two.'

Madeleine, whose curiosity was getting the upper hand, was followed through the aperture by Maud.

'Go right back. If you go right back there you'll find that you'll be able to stand up straight.'

The two girls found themselves in a sort of recess, in which, as Maud said, they were able to hold themselves erect.

'The place in which we are is a kind of crow's nest built in the shaft of a chimney. The chimneys in this house are chimneys ; in some of them there is room for a dozen people to stand. I rather fancy that more than one chimney-sweep has wondered what architectural freak caused such an obstruction to be placed in this

particular chimney—when the fires are alight downstairs this place gets pretty warm. Now, notice. As we stand here there appears to be this hole in the wall, and nothing more—a *cul de sac*—I shut the door. It's fairly dark, isn't it? The sort of darkness you can cut with a knife, almost as dark as it was in the passage. I have some matches in my pocket.'

She took them out and struck one. Madeleine, remembering Bianchi's matches, could not help but smile. The wavering light showed that where the door had been there was what seemed to be a second hole in the wall. Maud, moving forward, illuminated it with her flickering match.

'You see the trick? Pretty, isn't it? When the door comes right open—and it does come right open every time you open it, or it won't open at all—it swings back into this cavity, which it exactly fits, concealing it entirely, so that it seems that as if there were nothing but the recess in which we were standing to be seen; and it's only when the door is closed that the cavity's detected. Out goes the match. For your sake, my dear, I'll light another. This cavity opens on to a flight of steps. We'll ascend them, if you please. I'll go first, showing you as much light as a match will permit. Be careful how you come; the steps are steep, the ceiling low, the walls uncomfortably close together; one has to ascend in a somewhat humiliating attitude. Stop for a moment, there's another match gone bang! We'll try a third. You see, we're at the top, we can't go any farther, and yet we don't seem any better off for having come so far. But observe. I raise my hand; I touched the ceiling; and—there's a great piece of it given way, vanished into thin air. There's a hole just big enough for us to scramble through. I'll go first, and you come after.'

There was, as the speaker said, at the touch of her hand, a square hole in the apparently solid stonework overhead. Through this she deftly clambered. Madeleine was more awkward; it was only with Maud's assistance that she was able to get through it at all.

‘You’re unaccustomed. You’ll get more used to it in time ; then you’ll find that there’s a trick in it, and that this, my most private and peculiar entrance, is larger than it seems. Permit me to introduce you to my refuge from the world, and tell me, have I not a right to call it my holy of holies?’

Madeleine, looking about her, found herself standing in an apartment of considerable dimensions.

‘Which is it—an attic or a loft?’

‘Whichever you please ; but, whichever it is, its existence is known only to me.’

Madeleine’s question was prompted by the fact that the open-raftered roof sloped from the sides upward, attaining its greatest height in the centre of the room. The rafters were of oak, black with age. The walls also were of oak, as black as the rafters. On one side there was a huge open fireplace, in which there burned a fire ; although the fire was a large one, the room was not by any means too warm.

‘You’re looking at my fire. It’s of coal, as you perceive ; but whence the coal comes, and how it gets up here, is one of the secrets which, at present, I must keep locked up in my own breast.’

Madeleine’s curious glances were still wandering round.

‘It hardly conveys the impression of being the private apartment of a young lady of fashion, does it?’

It certainly did not. Anything less like the sort of apartment in which one might suppose that the average young lady of beauty, rank and fashion would be disposed to take her ease one scarcely could imagine. The place contained an extraordinary variety of miscellaneous articles. In one corner was a rough wooden table, on which were bottles, retorts, curious glass vessels of all sorts and shapes and sizes.

‘Yes, that’s my laboratory. I’m a chemist, among half a hundred other things. I pry unto Nature’s secrets—about as deep as that.’ She marked off a minute space upon her finger nail. ‘I dabble in poisons, experiment with explosives. I’ll be exploded myself one of these times, maybe!’

On one side there was an easel, over which a sheet was thrown; three or four cameras leaned against the wall; a heap of music was on the floor; books were everywhere; while in another corner stood what looked like a toy anvil and furnace, together with a number of gleaming tools.

‘That’s my smithy. I’m a blacksmith, too. I make all sorts of curious things. You’d be surprised if I were to show you some of the products of my hands. I’m an all-round genius, and up here in this haven, remote from the world, I can do just what my fancy bids without anyone supposing me to be quite insane. But now, my sweetest dear, perhaps you will be so very good as to tell me what you mean by your singular behaviour.’

‘My singular behaviour?’

‘Yes, your singular behaviour—in scouring the passages with your hat on in the middle of the night.’

Madeleine’s face was white. She looked at the girl in front of her, all glowing with life and vigour, the splendour of her vitality lending such enhancement to her unusual beauty, and told herself that it was impossible that she could be as this girl was—that she could be one-twentieth part as lovely.

Maud submitted to her scrutiny with her hands behind her back, her eyes all dancing.

‘Well, are you thinking of a story to fit the situation? I wouldn’t. We all ought to tell the truth—at times.’

‘It’s just the truth I wish to tell you. I am going. I was going when you interrupted me; I intend to go as soon as I leave you.’

‘Of course you do; and so you shall. Most sensibly resolved! You shall go through the window or up the chimney—whichever you please. I do hope this is a free country in which we’re living. But might I venture to suggest that you should give me some sort of cause for this sudden ardour of departure, which, when I saw you last, did not seem to be so very, very strong?’

A faint flush came into Madeleine’s cheeks. By degrees the tale was told. Maud listened with unconcealed amusement and delight, clapping her hands, in-

interrupting, like some excitable child, with continual questions.

‘And you mean to say that Conrad, Earl of Staines, took you into his arms and kissed you?’

‘Mistaking me for you.’

‘Tell that to the marines, my dear!’

‘Do you—do you dare to suggest that he behaved like that, knowing me to be a perfect stranger?’

‘Bosh your perfect stranger! Outwardly you looked like me, and to that extent he took you for me, I’ve no doubt. But inwardly, there was something which was not me, which was not mine, which never would be mine. And it was this something which was in you which called to him—though you knew it not, nor he either!—which set his blood all boiling, making him stretch out his arms to you, between which you stole because he felt and you felt that that was how God had foreordained it from the very beginning.’

By now Madeleine’s cheeks were a vivid red. The other’s impetuous words, her air of complete conviction, caused her pulses to throb, made her conscious of a sense of satisfaction.

‘Maud!’ she said, half beneath her breath.

‘You’re one kind of ass, my dear, and I’m another; but you may take mine for words of wisdom when I say that with you and Conrad it’s a case of heart calling unto heart. The thing is as plain as the ends of my fingers! Ever since we were the merest children he has never kissed me—or wanted to. I believe it’s years since we have shaken hands. We’re antipathetic; he bores me; the poor soul doesn’t mean it—it’s his misfortune. I’m pretty glib of tongue, but I declare to you that I know no more what to say to him than if he were a wooden dummy. And as for me—I’m beyond his comprehension. But when you appear upon the scene, all this vanishes—comes sweet sympathy, perfect understanding; you’re in each other’s arms, at each other’s lips. One need not be over and above clear-sighted to see in this the hand of Providence, sweet maid.’

‘Maud!’

'And so the betrothal's for to-morrow. Since I may be unavoidably absent, may I be permitted to offer you my congratulations now?'

'Don't talk like that. It hurts. You don't know how much. It's because of what you say that I'm set on going to-night. And I will go, too.'

'Will you? Indeed! Dear me! And, pray, whose rag-bag have you been robbing to get those clothes which you have on? The hat is shocking, the coat's a bad imitation of a fashion which is five years old; the dress, my dear, it's a shapeless, tasteless rag, which I should be ashamed to see a servant wear.'

'You are candid at last. You begin to appreciate the situation at its proper worth.'

'Do I? How?'

'These clothes, of which you speak so plainly and so truthfully, are my natural ones. Hitherto you have only seen me in borrowed plumes. These scourings of the rag-bag are, practically, the only garments which I have. In them, I live and move and have my being. They are such as are proper to my station. Do you think the Earl would perceive that hand of Providence of which you spoke quite so clearly if he saw me now? Or that the Countess would be so eager to urge on the betrothal?'

'You talk utter nonsense, which is unfortunate in one who, in other respects, is so very much like me. In any case, they're not your natural, but your unnatural, clothes, my dear. You don't suppose that Nature ever meant you to be clothed like that? You must have very singular notions if you do. Give me that thing which 'twere base flattery to call a hat.'

Before Madeleine was prepared for what the speaker proposed to do, Maud, drawing out the dagger-like pin which kept it in its place, had the article in question in her hand.

'Maud! What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to tear it into strips, and use it to feed the fire—a better fate than it deserves.'

'Then you'll send me hatless out into the streets.'

'I'd sooner you went hatless than with a thing like this upon your head. Possibly you're unaware that a hat is meant for an ornament, and not for a disguise. Better clap a copper saucepan on your crown than a libel in straw.'

It was already too late to interfere to any purpose. Maud, grasping the hat with her strong, white hands, had already torn it into two clean halves, which she was again dividing. Madeleine eyed, with mingled feelings, the process of destruction. The fragments were thrown on to the fire.

'There! Now let them ascend to heaven in horrid smoke. Will you oblige me with the thing which, once upon a time, was perhaps a coat?'

As Maud advanced the other retreated, instinctively putting her hands up to her throat, as if to shield herself from personal attack.

'I think you must be mad.'

'Then you'll find there's a method in my madness. Will you have the extreme kindness to hand me over that recollection of a jacket?'

'No!'

'But, my dear, you will. You shouldn't speak so unkindly to your sister. Come, twin soul, may I play the part of the lady's maid, and help you with your buttons?'

She went close up to Madeleine, and, before the girl had suspected her intention, deftly unbuttoned the jacket at the bottom. Madeleine, making a futile effort to reclose it, exposed it at the neck. In an instant that was opened, she was spun round like a teetotum, the jacket was drawn right off her, and Maud had torn it clean in two down the centre of the back. The audacity of the deed seemed to have taken the victim's breath away. She stood and stared, and gasped.

'You—you are a wicked girl! I suspected it from the first. Now I am sure!'

'Is that so, my sweetest pet? Do you think these pieces of cloth will smell if I put them on the fire?'

There is a very strong up-draught; it ought to carry away any disagreeable odour. We might try, anyhow—we will.'

Very quietly she went and placed piece after piece of what had once been Madeleine's jacket carefully in the heart of the fire, stirring it up with the poker to assist the process of combustion. As the blaze went up the chimney she turned, still with the poker in her hand.

'There, you see there isn't any smell; and how well it burns!' She put the poker down. 'Now, heart's beloved, will you show me how you put yourself outside that relic of antiquity which never was a frock?'

'It's kind of you to make fun of me, and it's very easy, and to laugh at the only clothes with which my poverty has enabled me to provide myself. But can't you understand that what to you is jest, to me is deadly earnest?'

'And isn't it deadly earnest to me? Aren't I conducting this affair with the most serious precision? Isn't it down the side that the bodice, sweet, is hooked?'

Madeleine retreated hastily towards the corner of the room.

'Don't come near me! If you do I'll—'

'Yes—you'll—? But of course you will. One can always rely upon your doing just what is right, true heart. I feel sure it is down the side.'

'Will you let me out of this—this place?'

'Certainly, when you've put yourself outside that—thing.'

'Then, do you propose that I shall take my walks abroad without even this "thing" on by way of a frock?'

'You wouldn't present a more shocking spectacle than you do now even if you did. I do assure you that it is altogether out of the question that I should allow my sister to be seen by anyone in such a horror.'

'I'm not your sister.'

'You're not only my sister, sweetest, but I suppose,

in a manner of speaking, you'll soon be my cousin-in-law as well.'

'Your cousin-in-law?'

'Haven't you bound yourself to marry Conrad? Aren't you to be the future Countess of Staines? Isn't the betrothal for to-morrow? Your mind must be very full of weighty matters if such trifles as these slip out of it so easily.'

'Can you be seriously suggesting that I should commit this—this shameless crime? That I should allow a man—any man!—to publicly pledge himself to become my husband, while he supposes me to be someone other than I am? Is it possible that you can't see the monstrous nature of the thing you are proposing?'

Maud, laughing, held out her hands in front of her with a little air, as if in mockery of the other's tragic gestures.

'There's nothing monstrous in betrothing yourself to a man who has asked you to marry him, and whom you have promised to wed.'

'I believe you are stark mad!'

Dropping on to a chair, placing her elbows on the table which stood beside it, Madeleine covered her face with her hands.

'Aren't you aware that there is truer, nobler, higher reason in some forms of madness than in certain kinds of sanity? You know very little of the world's story if you don't know that. You love the man.'

'Love him!'

'Don't tell me that you have only spoken to him for five minutes and sundry seconds. I know all that, but it's wide of the mark. You're like me—tinder—which a spark sets in a flame, but which nothing can extinguish. Conrad's been to you the spark. You're aflame with love for him. Deny it upon oath, if you dare.'

'Even supposing that what you say were true—'

'There's no supposing—it's just bald fact—and Conrad's in love with you.'

'With a typewriting girl!'

'Stuff your typewriting girl! You're his equal—and

you are my superior ; his instinct's told him that already. Besides, a man doesn't fall in love with a woman because of her profession, or want of one—be he prince or peasant. He loves her because she is the creature of flesh and blood which his eyes behold, and his heart desires.'

'Don't tempt me ! don't tempt me ! don't tempt me !'

Madeleine, springing to her feet, threw out her arms with a gesture of almost hysteric passion. Instantly springing behind her, unhooking her skirt at the back, Maud had her out of it, and was rushing away with it in triumph before she realised what had happened.

'Now I've got the skirt, you can keep the bodice, if you choose, though it's hardly supposed to be the correct thing to wear nothing but a bodice. Into the fire it goes, all in a heap, just as it is.'

Crushing it into a bundle, she crushed it down where the fire was hottest. It smouldered, then broke into flames. Throwing open a door, she disclosed a cupboard full of feminine glories.

'There's something with which to cover your nakedness. Take what you choose—what's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine. Since you don't seem in a choosing mood, perhaps you had better throw this over you while you're making up your mind.'

She advanced towards Madeleine, holding out a gorgeous silken dressing-gown.

'You beautiful, true-faced, simple-minded, pure-hearted daughter of the gods—you're too lovely to be human !—can any man behold you without loving ? Hardly any of those I remember to have met. Come, play the comedy through ! Is there in you none of the salt of adventure ? Here's a romance ready made, don't spoil it in the telling—see it to an end.'

'And live in hourly, momentary terror of discovery, a living lie, starting at every shadow, reading hidden meanings in each passing word, knowing full well that exposure, shame and punishment must come, turn and twist and double as I may. Is that your notion of a comedy ?'

'It seems you're all for tragedy ! So soon as you're

betroted, and the intrigue's set a-going, you'll be at liberty to tell him you're not me, or I will tell him I'm not you, or we'll tell him both together, if you choose. Then, if he prefers to have me for his wife instead of you, I'll not say him nay—that I promise you. Here's my hand on it.'

She held out her hand. Madeleine shrunk back.

'Don't tempt me! don't! don't!'

'And, to make the intrigue run the smoother and the surer, there are these.' Opening a drawer in a cabinet, Maud took out three or four rings. 'Here are these rings of mine, which you may have. I'm known to be a jewel-loving savage, so that, without any, your fingers may seem to be a trifle bare. But here's the crown and capital of the entire edifice. With this in its proper place—the duplicate of mine—even the inquiring Reginald may be defied.'

She was holding out a small gold wedding ring.

'But I could never get that on my finger.'

'Oh, yes, you could, and can, and shall! Leave that to me; I'm more skilled in certain matters than you may perhaps suppose. Suffer me to manipulate your finger in a certain manner of my own, and I'll have it on inside two jiffies; though I allow that you may find it a trifle harder to get it off again.'

'Don't tempt me! don't! don't! don't!'

Dropping on her knees, laying her head upon the table, Madeleine sobbed as if her heart would break. Maud, leaning over her shoulder, held out in front of her the wedding ring invitingly on the palm of her extended hand.

CHAPTER X

THE BETROTHAL

IN the music room there was quite a crowd. The sun slanted through the stained-glass windows, throwing splashes of colour upon the parquet floor, lending to the place something of a church-like atmosphere—an appearance, however, which the bearing and behaviour of the persons who passed to and fro amid the lights and shadows hardly emphasised.

The tale had been told last night at the Duchess of Culmshire's ball, at the Marchioness of Filey's dinner, at Lady Lune's reception. It had gone the round of the clubs, been talked of in the House, had even found its way into the papers.

'We are able to announce,' said the *Morning Post*, 'that a marriage has been arranged between the Earl of Staines and his cousin, Miss Maud Dorrincourt. It will, without doubt, be the wedding of the season. The bride will not only bring a great fortune to her husband, but her beauty is unique. She is probably the loveliest young lady of her age—some say of any age—in the world. We understand that the betrothal will take place at Staines House this afternoon. At the express desire of the Dowager Countess, the function will be semi-public.'

Time had not been lost. Informal cards had been sent out that same evening to such of the Fanshawe clan whose presence was desired on the morrow. The Countess was all agog to see the dream of her life consummated ere its close. Her matrimonial schemes had met with many a rebuff and one hideous failure,

but victory was crowning them at last, and she was desirous that all the world should learn the fact—and on the instant.

There she was, in her great arm-chair, on an impromptu six-inch-high platform, which had been raised in the centre of the room, bent double, her yellow claws clutching at the arms, her great eyes travelling shrewdly hither and thither, and, in particular, glowering at the people who came to pay her compliments and offer her congratulations. Scant were the words she uttered in acknowledgment, and each was barbed. She belonged to a period when the language used was stronger and tongues were rougher than they are supposed to be to-day. Besides, one forgives all manner of rudeness in a lady who has seen a century.

‘Extraordinary old woman!’ declared Lady Penelope Merridew—Sir Jasper is an offshoot of the cadet branch of the Fanshawes. ‘She’s been at the girl to marry Staines ever since she first set eyes on her. For my part, from what I know of the young lady—and the old one—I shouldn’t be surprised if pressure of a curious sort has not been brought to bear upon at least one of the contracting parties.’

‘The girl’s stark mad!’ returned Mrs Trefusis-Yarmouth, to whom the observation was addressed. ‘She’s the most insolent creature I ever met; and conceited—she’s eaten up by it. I pity Staines—but, then, it’s always been my conviction that all the Fanshawes are mad.’

‘Thank you, my dear; perhaps you forget that my husband is one of them.’

The other shrugged her shoulders.

‘So’s Mr Trefusis-Yarmouth, and I’m sure I tell him often enough that he’s stark mad.’

The Hon. Dudley Fennel exchanged a few remarks with Mr Reginald Fanshawe.

‘So it has happened. I thought you told me that it never would.’

‘It never will.’

Mr Fennel eyed him curiously. Reginald spoke with

an easy lightness which seemed to suggest that he himself was assured of the truth of what he said, and as if he found the entire business most amusing.

‘It’s all very well for you to stick to your fancy, and, of course, I’m perfectly well aware that the marriage will put your nose most uncommonly out of joint, and that you’ll do your level best to prevent its ever coming off; but it seems to me that you’ve precious little to go upon.’

‘There is more in every situation than meets the public eye.’

‘What the deuce do you mean by that—what may you happen to be driving at? Hasn’t the girl thrown up the sponge, and knuckled down to Staines?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Then what the devil have we been all brought here for?’

‘To assist in an act of a little comedy—that’s all.’

Dudley Fennel stared.

‘You’re pleased to speak in riddles. Can’t you say straight out what you mean—to me? Do you wish me to understand that the girl has not agreed to marry Staines?’

‘I’ll put it in this way. I’ll lay you two to one, in anything you please, that Maud Dorrincourt has not said she’ll marry Staines—make a note of the exact wording of the bet—and I’ll take you again at the same price that she never will.’

‘Then why on earth have we been brought here to witness their betrothal?’

‘Ah, that’s another question, which you must address to my dear old granny, or to the saintly Staines.’

The Bishop of Fulham was there, and a couple of canons, and three or four parsons of lesser degree; it seemed as if the Dowager designed to throw a religious flavour over the affair. The Bishop went up to Staines, and took him by the hand.

‘I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. It gives me the greatest pleasure to be here on so auspicious an occasion, and one so pregnant with the promise of future happiness.’

The Earl's brown face was glowing. An unusual light was in his eyes. His ordinary gravity seemed to be in eclipse—as if the sun of that happiness of which the Bishop spoke had come in front of it.

'It's very good of you to say so. I can assure you that if love sanctifies marriage, mine will have a certain consecration. Never man loved woman better than I love my wife that is to be.'

The Bishop, who had some intimate acquaintance with the speaker, was struck by his buoyant tone, and by a certain flamboyant quality in the words he used, which was scarcely in keeping with his general reserve. He had hardly suspected him of a capacity to talk with such outspokenness of loving anything or anyone.

'You must show us an example of one of those marriages which are not failures.'

'I promise it. Sorrow may come, and disappointment, and material worries; but I undertake to guarantee that happiness shall stay with my wife and me, whatever steals in at the door.'

The Bishop, who had as much matrimonial experience as anyone, felt that this man was unduly sanguine. Having some knowledge of Miss Dorrincourt, he would have been very far from willing to undertake a personal guarantee of the sort to which the speaker referred. Above all, he was amazed to learn that the Earl seemed possessed of bumps of devotion and of faith with which he had never for a moment credited him.

Up in the gallery the organ was being played, the piece being an odd, stormy, irregular thing—an impromptu, possibly, of the performer's own, scarcely in touch with the occasion; full of fire and fury, with nothing in it of that strain of joy and jubilation which one is apt to associate with the sound of wedding bells. Signor Bianchi was the player; he played as if he were ushering in a scene of strife, bloodshed, murder. Every note he sounded seemed to be a shriek of rage.

On a stool at his side, but facing him, so that he leaned with his back against the instrument, was another man, who seemed to derive considerable entertainment from

the passion of Bianchi's playing. He kept addressing to him little satirical remarks, as if he found it impossible to keep his enjoyment wholly to himself.

'That is a tender little thing you play. It is very soothing. You breathe forth the spirit of perfect peace.' On a sudden, the instrument burst into a very hurricane of sound. 'There, now, you distil the very essence of the ideal marriage; it is always like that—so calm, so seraphic! The touch is, perhaps, a little sentimental; but it comes from the heart, my friend.'

'It is false!'

Bianchi's exclamation did not seem intended to apply to what the other had been saying, but to refer to something of which they had been previously speaking. The organist tossed back his head, covered with its mane of thick black hair, and glared up at the organ pipes above him, as if they were so many demons sent for his destruction. His companion, plainly understanding his allusion, eyed him queerly; then shut his eyes, and smiled.

'Very well, then, it is false. But it is in the papers.'

'The papers! What are the papers? Nothing but lies! I tell you it is false.'

'Then it is false. Only the people are here. Behold them! For what, then, are they come? Is it for nothing?'

'How do I know for what they are come? What do I care? What is it to me?'

'It is to hear your pretty music they are come.'

Bianchi glared at him with a look of rage which was murderous in its intensity, only its effect was lost, since it happened that just at that moment the speaker was leaning as far back as he conveniently could, with his eyes fast closed, as if he were about to indulge in the luxury of a little doze.

'All that you say is nonsense—it is impossible. She loves me. I swear to it! Has she not given me the proofs?'

'Those proofs! What is it that you call proofs, my friend?'

'They are enough for me, I promise you, and it is I

who am the chief concerned. And even if she did not love me, she would have nothing to do with that lump of ice, that frozen thing. She has told it me a dozen times. He is to her a wooden dummy. She cannot bear to be left alone with him for a minute. Has she not said it with her own lips?’

‘There never was a woman yet that lied.’

‘She is not one of that sort, I am sure. Besides, is it not the common talk that she has refused him a hundred times? She will not even look at or speak to him. Have I not seen her turn her head away when he came near, refusing to answer, treating him as if he were something worse than a dog? And is it to be supposed that she would change her mind, become another creature, all in a moment, and I know nothing? No, no, no! It is false, all that is in the papers. It is false!’

‘So! You know best. It is false. That you have a mind at ease is plain. That is why you play so very tenderly.’

Again the organist cast at the speaker a glance of murderous rage, the effect of which again was lost, and for the same cause as before. As if in harmony with the condition of the performer’s nervous system, the instrument thundered out a tumult of sound which recalled the madness of a witches’ Sabbath.

The incongruity of the thing was noticed down below.

‘With what very odd music the gentleman upstairs is favouring us,’ remarked pretty Mrs Pendleton to handsome young Davis Urquhart. ‘It seems hardly reminiscent of “The Voice that breathed o’er Eden.”’

‘He’s a married man, that chap. He sees with the prophetic eye. He’s giving us a forecast of what always does come after.’

She tapped him on the shoulder with her gloved hand.

‘You always do know so much, you boys. It’s a comfort to reflect that you know less as you grow older. But what I want to know just now is, where’s the bride that is to be?’

Others were beginning to put the same inquiry. Here was the bridegroom and the wedding guests, but where

was the bride? Time was passing; why did she still tarry?

Even as the question fluttered from between Mrs Pendleton's lips, it was answered. The great doors at the end of the room were thrown wide open, and through them there came a vision of youth and loveliness.

The bride that was to be!

Had she purposely designed to choose the most effective fashion of making a dramatic entry, she could scarcely have succeeded better. Her continued absence was on the point of becoming the topic of every tongue, and, behold! she was.

A chorus of welcome went up on every side. People hastened forward to give her greeting. Congratulatory words rained down on her. Most girls, finding themselves received in such a manner, at such a moment, would have been disconcerted. There was no appearance of anything of the kind about her. She faced them as if she were a very queen—as if in rendering her homage they were but giving her her due.

She advanced four or five steps towards the centre of the room, and then stood still. By all it was admitted that never had she looked more beautiful. She stood quite straight, as she always did—one foot slightly forward, her head thrown back, her face looking a little up, and in her glorious eyes a look which those who had sufficient penetration to observe such things found more than a trifle strange—inscrutable, indeed.

'It was as though,' declared Lady Penelope Merridew, when all was over, perhaps a little fancifully, 'she saw something which we didn't see—and never should see, or ever could. Something which was inspiring her, holding her up, leading her on, making her oblivious of the presence of any living creature except her own most lovely self.'

In this latter statement of her ladyship's there was some truth; she did appear unmoved by the throng which crowded round her—not flatteringly unmoved. It was only when the hero of the hour threaded his way through the eager little mob that she evinced any signs of interest

at all. But, at sight of him, all in a moment her face and throat were dyed a vivid red—into her eyes there came a sudden recognition of things material. The change was so marked that none could help but notice it.

‘Reggie,’ observed the Hon. Dudley Fennel to Mr Fanshawe, ‘your information is all wrong. Put your money on some other filly. This one will answer to every touch of Staines’ hand upon the bridle. She loves the very ground he walks upon.’

Reginald was staring with all his eyes as if bewildered.

‘I can’t make it out. There’s some infernal jugglery.’

‘There can be no sort of doubt about the jugglery, and the name of the juggler’s Love. Don’t you be a fool, my boy, and make a row because you’re beaten. You ought to know enough of the sex to be aware that a woman loves a man to-day because she didn’t yesterday, and that the more she didn’t yesterday the more she does to-day. It’s a way the darlings have. On my word, I envy him. So far as looks are concerned, there isn’t a girl about who can hold a torch to her—and with all your granny’s money! Staines is a man to whom the gods are going to be kind.’

Among those who were interested in the advent of the bride that was to be, not the most backward was the organist. His curiosity was unmistakable, and of a peculiar kind. Some might have supposed that he would have greeted her appearance with some sort of musical salutation. But no, this gentleman had ways and manners of his own. So soon as she appeared, he stopped short in the hurricane hubbub in which, judging from appearances, he had been endeavouring to give vent to his emotions, stopped short just as his fingers were about to press the notes in the middle of a bar. He rose from his seat, as if actuated by springs, rushed to the edge of the gallery, and, leaning his body half way over it, stared at the young lady with might and main. His companion, leaning back in his own particular corner, appeared to find his conduct more and more amusing—his whole body seemed shaken by silent laughter.

‘She does not see me. She will not look at me.

Her eyes are for all others. No, that is not it ; she sees me, but it is as if I were some dead thing ; she makes no sign—I am as nothing. Is it that she wishes me to understand that I am a thing despised ? Is it so ? Name of God ! Is it so ?’

The excitable musician uttered these disconnected sentences in eager, trembling, broken tones, as if they were merely the ejaculations of his troubled soul, and were addressed to no one in particular. His companion, however, chose to take them as if they were addressed to him. His face, as he replied, was wreathed in smiles.

‘My friend, is it that your mind is troubled ? Not possible ! Yours is a sure and a certain faith—have you not the proofs ? Well, then ! What is in the paper is all false—there is nothing that need cause you the least concern.’

The organist turned upon him with a snarl like a savage cur. For an instant it seemed as if he would assail him with physical violence. But, on a sudden, the speaker opened his eyes, as if he were drawing shades away from in front of them, till they shone out of his head like two lighted lamps, meeting the other’s anger with a glance before which Bianchi’s eyelids were quickly lowered.

The old Countess, seated in state upon her daïs, deserted, for the moment, by the little throng who had gone to offer greeting to the maid whose presence they attended, noticing that the instrument was, on a sudden, silent, and that the organist had advanced to the gallery’s edge, beckoned a servant to her side.

‘Go up and tell Bianchi to keep on playing.’

The servant went ; and, presently, there was another burst of tumult, which, if it was meant for music, was distinctly not of the kind which ‘soothes the savage breast.’

Amidst the din the Earl and the lady advanced, arm in arm, towards the watchful Dowager—the others falling in on either side and behind, so as to form a sort of impromptu retinue. The old lady did not receive them with any special show of enthusiasm. She looked the

girl up and down appraisingly. When she spoke, her croaking tones seemed rustier than ever.

‘You’ve kept us waiting. I suppose you think that’s nothing—after keeping me waiting all these years.’ Raising her ghoulish eyes, she kept them fixed upon the other’s features. ‘You’re a lovely girl—worth waiting for. Staines, you’ve got the loveliest girl in all the world for wife. There isn’t a woman in the room fit to touch the hem of her skirt.’

This was pleasant hearing for those of the women who heard; and, by now, they were all gathered closely round the daïs. Glances of varying import were exchanged. The old lady went on, wholly indifferent to any impressions her words might have made. She kept her eyes fixed upon the other’s countenance.

‘Kiss me.’

A look of momentary indecision seemed to pass over the girl’s face; her skin seemed to whiten. Then, moving a little forward, she lightly brushed with her lips the withered cheek.

‘Kiss me again.’

The girl’s lips perceptibly tightened; again she hesitated, then did as she had done before.

‘I’ll be bound, Staines, that she kisses you more warmly, and takes longer at it. The jade’s kiss is like the touch of thistledown, and gone before it’s come. Kneel down in front of me. You stand too high above me. I cannot see you as I would. I’m getting old.’

This time, without a moment’s hesitation, the girl did as she was bid. She knelt, holding the fingers of her two hands loosely intertwined.

‘Come closer.’

She went closer, till her face was within a few inches of the Dowager’s. The old woman regarded her for some seconds silently, none of those who were looking on uttering a word. When she spoke, there was that in her creaking tones which struck an unsuspected note in the hearts of some of those who heard.

‘You’re like a dream of my own youth. I was pretty when I was young—long time ago. Not so lovely as you

—no, nor half. You're Beauty's queen—a credit to the family. But I was pretty in my way ; soft cheeks, bright eyes, and waving hair. And, as I look at you, I seem to see myself again as I was when I was young.'

She placed her hands upon the girl's shoulders, who, with an impetuous little burst, threw her arms about her neck, and kissed her with an ardour of which she could scarcely have complained on the score of coldness. The action seemed to touch the old woman in a fashion which was not in keeping with her notorious character. She touched the girl's hair lightly, almost reverently, with her tremulous fingers.

'My child ! my child ! my child ! when you come so close to me I can see how beautiful you are.'

Then she broke into a strain which took those who knew her best completely by surprise.

'God guard you, and keep you from any more of the knowledge of evil than is good for you, and give you joy with your husband, and children who shall be more to you than mine have been to me, and length of days, so that when you reach my age, you may have known less of life's bitterness than I have done, and be a better woman at the end.'

She turned to those who stood about her.

'This is my grandchild, Maud, as you all know well—to whom may God grant wisdom. I am going to give her all that I have, so you may all take warning. Those who know me know that what I have said is said ; I never change my mind. So, from this time forth, none of you need expect to receive from me one penny. She is to marry Staines, so that she will be the head over all of you ; though you searched the world, you could not find one fitter. As you all know, it is the usage in our house that the head shall plight his troth in the face of all of us. Staines, this is our betrothal ring. With it I was betrothed, and all the women who have been wives to the lord till the record of them's lost. To you I hand it, to use it in your turn.'

She spoke with a certain dignity, as if something of the decrepitude of age had dropped away from her in

presence of her consciousness of the unique importance of the scene in which she figured. She drew a ring from her shrivelled finger—a single diamond, set, claw-like, in a chased band of time-worn gold. The Earl received it from her with a deep inclination of his head, then turned to the girl, who had already risen to her feet.

As he did so, Reginald Fanshawe, coming on to the platform, addressed himself to the expectant lady.

‘Pardon me, I rather fancy there is something which you ought to miss. Suffer me for one moment to see your hand.’

Without waiting for the permission he requested, he took her left hand, and, raising it in the air, examined it with an eager scrutiny, which presently changed to dissatisfied surprise. He looked up at her as if puzzled, to which she replied with a scornful stare. In her voice there was a sarcastic intonation.

‘What’s missing?’

‘I was afraid you had lost your mother’s ring. Yesterday it was not on your hand.’

She held up the third finger of her left hand, in the flesh of which was deeply set a plain gold ring.

‘That ring has not left my finger since it was first put on.’

‘What’s all this to do?’ exclaimed the Countess. ‘What’s the matter with the man? Reginald, take yourself away; this hour is none of yours.’

Reginald, obeying, returned to Dudley Fennel’s side.

‘You’re a fool,’ murmured, *sotto voce*, his sympathetic friend.

Mr Fanshawe frowned, and muttered,—

‘There’s some infernal jugglery somewhere; I’ll swear to it.’

‘Now that that over-clever brother of yours has obscured himself for once,’ went on the Dowager, ‘it’s for you, Staines, to play well your part.’

Except the Lady Hildegarde, who stood, a sufficiently truculent figure, at the Countess’s side, the Earl and the maiden had the daïs to themselves. All eyes regarded them. Taking the lady’s hand in his, drawing it towards

him, he slipped the betrothal ring upon her finger, saying, in tones which rang out clearly through all the room,—

‘With this ring I pledge to thee my plighted troth. May God destroy me root and branch if, while life is in you, I take any but you to be my wife and the sharer of my bed and board.’

It was the ancient form of words which had always been used on such occasions by the heads of his house. There were not a few among those who listened who deemed them to be of a strength which it is as well, for all our sakes, is out of fashion.

Stooping, he kissed the ring, then, standing upright, the lady’s lips, on which she burst out crying. Whereupon he put his arms about her, and drew her to him; none noticing that the organ had ceased to play, and that the organist, leaning over the gallery, waved his arms in the air with frantic gestures, as if beside himself with frenzy, and that his companion, holding him by the shoulders, was exerting his strength to draw him back.

CHAPTER XI

A LOVER SCORNE

A ROOM cumbered with a musician's litter—a musician, apparently, who was the master of many instruments. On one side, a little in a corner, an open grand piano. On a small table, just in front of it, a violin, the bow upon its belly. A foot or two further, a harp against the wall, one of its strings broken low down near the pedals, the detached wire dangling in the air. On a sideboard opposite, leather cases, one open, disclosing a flute with its parts unscrewed. A cornet stood near by on the floor; and, on the other side of the fireplace, a four-stringed double bass, the bow hanging on one of the pegs. Music on the floor, chairs, tables, piano, sideboard, mantelpiece—everywhere; a good deal of it in rags, as if the soul which it enshrined had been torn to tatters.

Pacing hither and thither, gesticulating as he went, was the room's proprietor—Paolo Bianchi. He was in such a temper and whirlwind of passion as to be rather mad than sane. His arms were in continual movement, branching out in every direction, behind, in front, towards either side, up towards the ceiling, down towards the ground—as if they had been hung on springs, which every motion of his body put in action. He flung his head, with its thick mane of hair, this way and that, his eyes rolled, his voice rose and fell, now rising to the roar of a bull, now sinking to a hoarse whisper of the intensest bitterness.

Some persons might have found the gentleman's frenzy more than a little ridiculous, and one of those persons happened to be seated at the piano at that particular moment.

This was the gentleman who, in the organ-loft, had seemed to derive so much entertainment from the peculiar quality of the Signor's performance.

He was an unusually tall man, and, although his shoulders were broad, suggesting striking lung capacity, almost grotesquely thin. His head was too small for the size of his body. It was bullet-shaped. His light brown hair was cropped close to the scalp in Continental fashion. He had a trick of holding himself so very straight that one was apt to wonder if the vertebræ of his back and neck sloped outwards; one would hardly have been surprised to see him unconsciously fall into one of the postures of the professional contortionist. His cheeks and chin were shaven, but he wore a huge moustache, whose proportions amply compensated for the absence of any other hirsute adornment. Underneath this moustache his jaw stood out suddenly, with a squareness which recalled the muzzle of a bull-dog, and its tenacity. His nose, though small, was slightly hooked—two little lobes at the side stood out a little on either side. There seemed to be some singularity about the structure of his eyelids, as if the tendon of the upper lid was unduly long, so as to make it more convenient for him to allow it to droop than to hold it up. At least, it seemed to be his natural habit to keep it only just sufficiently raised to enable one to perceive that there was an eye behind; it was conceivable that one might be an acquaintance of some standing without becoming aware what sort of an eye it really was. The predominant expression of his face was a seemingly perennial smile—so curious a smile, that the more one regarded it the more one wondered what it meant. One felt that this man would smile at all things, more especially at those which moved others to tears.

While Bianchi dashed to and fro, raging and storming, calling on all the gods to witness his afflictions, this gentleman sat at the piano and strummed, in a fashion which hardly suggested the cultured musician, a little jig. The thing, which was the merest jingle, he repeated over and over and over again, with a monotonous iteration which in itself was maddening. And he sat very

straight, with his head thrown back, peeping at the other from beneath his nearly shut eyelids—and he smiled.

‘I will kill her! I will destroy her! She shall be as the thing that has not been. I will show her what is the reward of treachery. She shall know that my hate can be as hot as my love, that my vengeance is like the thunderbolt—that it blasts, consumes, erases.’

The gentleman at the piano restarted his senseless jingle for the dozenth time.

‘Bravo!’ he cried.

‘She supposes that my anger is not a thing to be feared—that is because I have forgiven her again and again. But why? why was she forgiven? My love for her was great; it was the whole of my life. It is true she has offended me, not once, not twice, but a hundred, a thousand times. But each time the offence was but a trifle—so great was my love, it was as nothing. When the occasion of the offence was passed, and I heard again the music of her voice, and saw the beauty of her eyes, my heart leaped up within my breast; there was not room for anger any more. Therefore she supposes that, because in little things my love was before everything, it is not a thing to be feared—my wrath. Wherein she mistakes. In the presence of a great betrayal, a monstrous wickedness, a scarlet sin, my love it goes! it is transformed! it becomes another thing! And in its place there rises the spirit, the spectre, the colossus of revenge. My fury drives me on. It is unstoppable.’

‘It is so. That is plain.’

And the jig continued.

‘In my wrath, which is a just wrath, I pronounce on her sentence of judgment, which is in accordance with the principles of the eternal justice; I pronounce it to all the world. I proclaim her destruction; I will destroy her with the fingers of my own hands, branch and root I will destroy her. She has ruined my life, broken my heart, betrayed me, lied to me, played with me the fool!’

‘And robbed you of her voice, eh? That voice of which I’ve heard so much.’

'Ah! Her voice! My God! Her voice! Lazarus, I do declare to you that never was there a voice like hers—never! never! I do not speak as a fool, I speak only of what I am certain. I know all the great voices which still live; I have a perfect knowledge of all the great voices which are dead—their range, their quality, their timbre. I could tell you, just as if they were this moment in this room, all the things which made them great. But never was there one of them which could be compared to hers—never! never! You never heard one like it in your dreams.'

'And I have heard some voices in my dreams, yes! Whose every note struck against a treasure chest, and brought out of it a rain of gold.'

'Ah! as for gold, it is to me as nothing! It is not a thing for which I care.'

'No, gold is not a thing for which you care. It is sure.'

Bianchi seemed totally unconscious of the sarcasm which was in the speaker's tone.

'My tastes are simple.'

'Oh, yes, they are most simple.'

'My wants—the things which I esteem, which I desire—they are all within the range of a modest purse.'

'Of a most modest purse! There is not the slightest doubt of it. You are one of those men who desire only whatever they can get, eh? Is it not so?'

The organist still appeared impervious to the other's irony.

'It is so. What you say is quite true. Whatever I can get I am content to have. I am a child of Nature, a little flower of the field. I am content to bask in the sunshine. I ask no more. To me it is a pleasure to be alive in the beautiful world of the good God. That is how it is with me, as you know. But, all the same, as for the gold of which you speak, in her voice there is as much gold as there is in Africa, or in Australia either. Compared to it, her grandmother's money is as nothing. Pah! Like a halfpenny which I toss into the air.'

'And yet the old lady could build up a pretty pile of sovereigns, eh?'

'Her riches are immense, enormous, stupefying. But what is it compared to the money which is in that false girl's voice? I know! I know! Patti gets a thousand guineas when she sings. Well, she will get five, ten, fifteen, twenty thousand. This is a day when, for what is unique, you get what you choose to ask. That her voice is unique, I give you my word. There may be voices like it on the other side of purgatory—which I ask the good God to forgive me if I venture to doubt—but that there are none on this side, and never have been, I promise you. I would not let her sing for all the world—no, not I. She has a strange notion that her voice has been given her for the enjoyment of the whole world—to give it pleasure. That, of course, is folly.'

'Pure.'

'I let her sing once, twice, thrice, perhaps four or five times a year; in this place, in that place, in some other, it may be in each country once. I charge a hundred pounds for a seat—I get it, too, for as many seats as I choose to sell. It will be to give yourself out a poor person not to be able to pay to hear her sing, and, in these times, there are few of those who consider themselves to be anyone who will be willing to proclaim their poverty to the whole world. Now and then, every ten, every five years—something like that—I let her sing to the people, to the great crowd. For that I ask from each of them a mere bagatelle—it may be five pounds. In this way I make a hundred thousand, a hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year. I live at my ease; I have the nations at my feet; I twiddle my thumbs; I say, This is a pleasant world in which to be.'

'And she—what will there be for her, out of this little plan—which is the child of your simple tastes—eh?'

'For her? There will be the satisfaction of the artiste, the great artiste. She will know that it is out of her throat, her beautiful throat, that these things all come. As a woman, the pleasure of such a conviction will be immense.'

'Immense. Without the slightest doubt.'

'Besides, for her there will be the incense of my love, of my unceasing love, of my undying devotion—the adoration of one artiste for another artiste. I have a soul all sentiment, all poetry, all kindness. I have a great heart, which will compel me to kneel always at her feet, looking up with rapture into her lovely eyes. Ah, my friend, in that future which I propose for both of us, her future will be larger than mine; I give you my word.'

'And to think that this pretty scheme of yours should have all been spoiled—by Milord of Staines; that stupid Englishman who has no soul for song.'

Bianchi broke into a flood of imprecations. He shook his clenched fists, tossed his mane of hair, danced about as if he had a difficulty in finding an adequate vent for the torrent of his passion.

'I will kill her; yes, that is certain. And I will kill him, too, that is also certain. And before the sun goes down. Their bleeding bodies will be the proof that a noble spirit is not to be outraged without the sword of justice falling.'

Mr Lazarus, for the first time, ceased to strum that dreadful jingle. He bent back on his stool until one felt that if his anatomical structure had been of the common type, his spinal column must certainly have fractured. He raised his long arms above his head, his fingers fully extended, and he burst into laughter, which was so sudden, so loud, and so hearty, that Bianchi started back as if it had been a missile aimed at him.

'At what are you laughing? Is it at me? Is it at me that you laugh?'

The other gave no answer. He ceased to laugh as suddenly as he had begun. He rose from his stool, his enormous length towering above the other so that, beside him, Bianchi seemed a pigmy. He went to the table, on which there was the violin. Taking it up, he picked the strings with his fingers sharply. Bianchi clapped his hands to his ears.

'Ah! Do not touch it; it is all wrong—it is out of tune.'

'That is all right ; I play out of tune. What does it matter ?'

He drew the bow across the cords with a discordant screech, which made the organist spring from his feet.

'Ah, for the love of Heaven, do not make that dreadful noise ! Put down that horrible thing !'

'Not at all. I play you a little tune—all wrong.'

He played a little tune—all wrong ; indeed, with such a torturing of air and tune that it was difficult not to suspect that he was playing it as badly as he conveniently could.

Bianchi stared at him with a face of anguish.

'For one who has had all his life to do with music, it is extraordinary that you should have so little. There is no more music in you than there is in that board.'

'Nor one-tenth part as much. Out of that board an instrument may be fashioned ; out of me—never.'

He went on wrenching discords from the maltreated violin. Bianchi paced up and down, racked by his thoughts, and, probably, also by the music of his friend. At last the performer spoke.

'Bianchi.'

'Lazarus ?'

'What a pity it is that you never mean anything at all that you say.'

'I mean everything I say. I swear it.'

'You will do nothing to her.'

'I will kill her !'

'You will do nothing, also, to him.'

'I will kill him, too !'

'Bah ! your words are as froth. If they were to hear you they would not be at all afraid.'

'I swear to you in the name of the Virgin, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, I will kill them both !'

Mr Lazarus continued to make the fiddle give forth groans of agony. Presently he spoke again.

'No, you will do nothing.'

'Don't I tell you I will kill them both ?'

'You will do nothing. You will let them pull you by the nose ; you will let them kick you ; you will let them

make a fool of you; all that you will say is, "Do it again." You are of that kind.'

'I swear to you that I will kill them. You shall see it if you please.'

Once more Mr Lazarus was still—then spoke again in a sort of quiet drawl, as if he were giving half-unconscious utterance to ideas which were passing through his brain, and all the while he racked the fiddle.

'It is a pity that you do not mean sometimes what you say.'

'Do I not swear to you a hundred times that this time I mean it every word?'

'So? Supposing you to be not the chicken-hearted creature she takes you for, and that she cannot use you like a poor little dog of which she is tired, I will kill her for you.'

'You will kill her for me! How?'

'And also him.'

'Lazarus!'

'It is a small joke that I would play. I am fond of quips, and jests, and fancies.'

'I do not understand you in the least.'

'No? It is true that you would kill her?'

'Do I not tell you over and over and over again?'

'And him?'

'By the living God!'

Mr Lazarus removed the violin from his shoulder. He looked at it.

'This is a good fiddle of yours.'

'It is all out of tune; it is possible you do not know it? Holy Virgin!'

'It is so that I like it. All the people in the world are out of tune. It is when they are most out of tune you can do with them the most curious things. As, if you choose, I will show you.'

The organist gave a gesture which seemed to denote that he was mystified.

'What is it you mean?'

Mr Lazarus, returning the violin to its former position, recommenced its torture.

'How if I were to make her kill him?'

'Make her kill him? You could not do it!'

'No! Maybe. But I could try.'

'I wish you would tell me what it is you mean; you play with phrases better than you play the violin.'

'It is in this way—it is a little amusement I would have for men, not for fools.'

'I am not a fool.'

'No! Perhaps not. She takes you for one, that is sure.'

'I will show her I am not a fool—and you. Tell me, what is it you mean?'

'Have you ever heard of od?'

'Never in my life.'

'It is a sort of force I have, with which I make you do as I choose, not what you choose.'

'Do you mean the evil eye?'

'It is a sort of evil eye.'

'You have the evil eye? The Holy Virgin protect me!'

'I thought you were the fool she takes you for.'

'I am no fool, but, the evil eye! That is not a thing with which one trifles. It is to you, then, that I owe the whole of my misfortunes.'

'It is to your own folly—your own stupidity. She judged you well, this girl, when she slapped you across the face. She knew that in spitting at you she was safe.'

'She will die for it, I promise you.'

'She will not die for it. She will suffer nothing at your hands. You are too great a fool. She knows that well.'

'We shall see!'

'What we shall see. Supposing I were to make her kill him; for that she would be hung. You would be revenged upon them both, without any trouble to yourself, or any risk.'

'But how would you make her kill him?'

'By casting on her the evil eye.'

'Holy Virgin!'

Bianchi crossed himself for the second time. Mr Lazarus continued to torture the fiddle, and to grin.

'It is a little experiment I would make; I am of an experimental turn of mind. I do not say that I would do it, but I would try—try hard. I seek always to try everything that can be tried—to find out, to know. It is my nature. I will use this force I have—it is called odic force; and, by the use of it, I will try to bend her to my will. I will say nothing, not a word, but when I have brought her to a state in which she will do just as I choose, in my own thoughts I will think to myself, "I would like you, my girl, to go and look for Milord Staines, and when you have found him, to take a knife—one of your own if there is one at hand—and drive it to the hilt deep into his heart." And, if this force of mine has had on her its due effect, she will go straight off, and she will search for Milord, and, so soon as she finds him, no matter where, or who is looking on, without saying a word she will snatch up the first knife there is, and she will drive it into his breast, and he will fall—dead; and there will be an end of your affair.'

'It is impossible.'

'Perhaps—I do not say no. But I will try. That is, if you are not altogether the fool she takes you for.'

'Will she know what it is that she is doing?'

'No, she will know nothing at all. That is where the joke will be.'

'But they will not hang her for having done a thing when she did not know what it was that she was doing.'

'So much the better for you, for then, after all, she will be yours. She will be taken to prison, they will try her for murder, that is sure—that will break her spirit, so that in your turn you will be able to do with her as you will. Her voice will remain. She will be only delighted to use it as you may desire—at the lifting of your finger she will make you your hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year. You will be all that there will be left to her—all else she will have lost; surely than that nothing could suit you better. Is it not a pretty little scheme—a beautiful revenge—eh?'

'You think that she would have me after all?'

'It is sure—why not? Her family will be glad to give

her to the first person who will take her off their hands—you need fear no opposition in that quarter. And perhaps the old lady will give you her money, too—who knows?’

Bianchi ran his hands, one after the other, through the wilderness of his long black hair. He gnawed his under lip; he knit his brows; he seemed to be turning something over in his mind. Mr Lazarus, still smiling, continued to extract excruciating sounds from the untuned fiddle, while from beneath his nearly closed eyelids he followed every movement of his friend. After an interval of silence, the organist began to make short, jerky remarks, as if they fell from him haphazard; the fiddler commented on them as they came, a certain saturnine humour seeming to earmark every word he uttered.

‘She has been false to me.’

‘As false as the grave—and falser.’

‘Did she not tell me that she loved me?’

‘Over and over again—with, in her voice, the raptures of a young hot love.’

‘The proofs are in my heart—and in my pocket, too.’

‘Certainly—of themselves they are enough to hang her.’

‘Her voice—I have done all for it!’

‘Without you it would have been not anything. No!’

‘I have made of it a perfect organ!’

‘Out of nothing. Yes!’

‘How has she rewarded me?’

‘With a slap across the face.’

The excitable gentleman again began to prance up and down the room.

‘By Heaven! By Heaven! By Heaven! It is a thing too horrible—a crime against Nature—a treachery not to be believed! It is more than she deserves if I throw her to the dogs, and they use her as if she were carrion.’

‘Or if you throw her to me to make of her a little joke.’

‘As for him, he deserves a double death.’

‘Yet such is our mercy—we propose to only kill him once. You understand, my friend, that what we pro-

pose to do is in the cause of science—that great cause. We take up—you and I—the position of two scientific inquirers—no more; that in all simplicity. We have heard that certain things it is possible to do; we desire to know if this is true; we make our little inquiries. For every experiment you need a subject. What viler body could we choose for a subject than that of this traitress, trebly dyed?’

The organist was standing still again; he was biting his finger nails.

‘And you do not think that they will hang her?’

‘Not at all; she will live to be your wife—that is, if you think her worthy of such honour.’

‘It is not I who does this thing.’

Of course not. Nor is it I.’

‘Lazarus! Who is it, then?’

‘You need not get hot—why do you always get so hot? I shall not be near when she does it. I shall not even see it done. By nature I am of a very tender disposition. I ought to know myself, and I tell you I am all tenderness—the whole of me. I would not hurt Milord with the tips of my fingers. Why should I? He is no enemy of mine.’

‘It is you who guide her hand.’

‘It is od.’

‘I know nothing of your od—it is a fool’s word. It is the evil eye that is in you—that is you! It is all the same.’

‘Listen to me, dear friend. You talk too much. It is an error. There are some things which never will be done—if you talk of them. You should not talk of them, either before or afterwards. Take that from me. The tongue and the sword are not good bedfellows. If you wish to fight much, talk little—that is an excellent prescription. There is too much of the strain of a coward about you.’

‘I am no coward.’

‘Maybe. You sound like one.’

‘I sound like one! How? Do I not tell you I will kill her—and him?’

'You say it; but it is only saying. She has slapped you across the face—it is as if I could see the prints of her fingers flaming on your flesh. But you only talk. If you are not the coward she takes you for, you will let me do with her as I will. You will say, "Revenge me, Lazarus." And I promise you that of vengeance you shall have your bellyful.'

Bianchi came striding towards the fiddler. He held out his hands in front of him.

'You think I am afraid to bid you take vengeance on this serpent?'

'She thinks so, that is sure.'

'Then she lies, and you, too, if you think with her. I say to you, cast on her the evil eye! Do with her as you will! Revenge me, Lazarus!'

Raising his voice, he assumed an attitude which seemed intended to suggest that he was putting pressure on his softer impulses, so as to enable himself to consign without flinching a creature of iniquity to righteous, if Rhadamanthine, justice. Lowering his fiddle, his companion tapped him on the shoulder approvingly with the end of the bow.

'So now you play the man. I see that you are not altogether the fool that she supposes. You can depend upon your Lazarus—he will forsake you never. He will give you as beautiful a revenge as you can possibly desire—so beautiful as that, my friend! And soon, so soon as he finds himself within reach of her.'

As he spoke, the door opened and Maud Dorrincourt came in. He glanced round, and, seeing her, turned again to the musician.

'So! It will be sooner even than I thought. It will be already now, dear friend!'

CHAPTER XII

THE SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF MR LAZARUS

THE girl remained standing just inside the door, with her hand still on the handle. She glanced from one to the other of the two men with, on her face, a look of laughter, noting, it seemed, with an air of considerable amusement the black looks with which Bianchi greeted her. She wore, pinned to the bosom of her dress, a single white rosebud; as she stood there, raising her right hand, she touched it gently with her fingers.

Silence followed her appearance. Her eyes rested on Mr Lazarus, as if, struck by the singularity of his appearance, she wondered who he was. Holding the violin in one hand, the bow in the other, he remained with his back towards the door, glancing at her over his shoulder, bending his spine, as if it had been made of indiarubber, the better to enable him to do so without moving from where he was. Her entrance seemed to inspire Bianchi with sudden anger, as if he had been some ill-tempered terrier. He clenched his fists; he ground his teeth; his eyes flamed; he looked as if he were disposed to spring at her, and, without any sort of parley, assail her with tooth and nail.

If she noticed the peculiarity of his demeanour, she treated it with the sublimest unconcern. She dropped a little curtsey, half mocking, wholly charming.

‘I hope, gentlemen, I do not interrupt you!’

Bianchi turned to Lazarus, like some snarling cur.

‘You hear her! This is how she comes to me! All smiling—fresh from her treachery! Is it to be believed?’

Lazarus did not reply. His whole attention was

occupied in observing the girl. It was strange, considering how strained was the position he was standing in, how motionless he remained.

Maud, still regardless of the singularity of his deportment, turning to Bianchi, favoured him with a little curtsey all to himself.

‘Signor! I haven’t seen you to speak to since—since when?’

‘Not since the great betrayal! Not since you plighted your troth—is that not what you call it?—to the English lord!’

‘No? That is so. How odd.’

‘It was not even an hour ago that you were guilty of this great, this inconceivable crime. You call it odd. To me it is still odder that you should come to me so soon—with a smile upon your face.’

‘Why, mayn’t I smile.’

‘Oh, you may smile. Your kind always smile. They smile with their lips, while, with their hands, they push men down into hell.’

‘Ssh!’ She put her finger up to her lips, her eyes alive with laughter. ‘We are not alone. Reserve your—Italian idioms until some other occasion. Present your friend to me.’

Throwing out his arms in a melodramatic gesture, he broke into a peal of affected, boisterous merriment. She put her hands up to her ears.

‘Signor! Laugh in tune. You’re all in flats.’

He continued his affected merriment, moving his arms up and down as if they had been semaphores.

‘She tells me to laugh in tune. How is it possible, when everything is in discord? Lazarus!’

He slapped his companion on the shoulder, which he managed to do by reaching high above his head. For the first time Mr Lazarus moved. He drew himself up straight, all in one piece, as it were, as if he had been moved by clockwork.

Bianchi continued in the same noisy tone of unnatural joviality.

‘I am desired, Lazarus, to present you to this lady.

I have the pleasure, Miss Dorrincourt, in presenting to you Mr Lazarus, my very good, well trusted friend.'

Mr Lazarus, his arms close to his side, still holding the violin and the bow, bent not only his head, but his body too, as if saluting, with profound obeisance, some great princess; while she, as if entering into the humour of the thing, bestowed on him the profoundest curtsey in return. Regaining her perpendicular, she gazed at him with open, candid, yet merry glances, as if seeking to ascertain whether, in his oddity, he was serious. To which he replied by lifting up the whole of his eyelids—pulling them up, it almost seemed, by a string which was inside his head—and meeting her laughing looks with the full glare of his own extraordinary eyes.

'I have much pleasure, Miss Dorrincourt, in meeting you. It is, to me, a great pleasure indeed.'

Either something saturnine which was in his tone, or the amazing change in his appearance, which was produced by the sudden unveiling of the eyes, affected the girl unpleasantly, so much was plain. Her cheeks went a little white, she gave a startled movement backwards, as if her instinct told her to place herself beyond his reach.

Bianchi commented on her action disagreeably.

'What is the matter with you, Miss Dorrincourt? Are you afraid of Lazarus?'

The girl made an evident effort to get the better of her transitory emotion, facing him with a mocking smile.

'My good Signor Bianchi, what do you mean by asking if I am afraid of Mr Lazarus? Is your friend an ogre, that he should inspire with instant terror everyone who looks at him?'

'I am not an ogre, Miss Dorrincourt, I give you my word. I am just an ordinary kind of man, no more than that.'

In spite of his assertion to the contrary, when the girl looked, half laughingly, at him again, he affected her as if he had been a very extraordinary kind of man indeed. His eyes were opened at their widest. As she met them, they seemed to act on her as if they had been the eyes of some malignant reptile, to hold her, disagreeably,

spell-bound. It was with an obvious struggle that she wrenched herself free, turning away from him as she did so with a movement of unmistakable repulsion.

Again the organist broke into forced, discordant laughter.

‘Why, Miss Dorrincourt, are you not well ; or is it that Lazarus has the evil eye ?’

She bit her lip, as if annoyed with herself for having exhibited confusion. But she kept her back turned towards Mr Lazarus, and evinced every disposition to keep it turned.

‘I had hoped, Signor Bianchi, to have tried over a new song with you ; but, since you are engaged, some other time will serve. It’s a kind of a song that’s not at all in a hurry.’

Lazarus glanced at Bianchi—this time from under his closed lids ; then, seeing him slow to take the hint he intended to convey, himself hurriedly said,—

‘We are not engaged, Miss Dorrincourt, believe me, we are not at all engaged—not in any way at all.’

On which Bianchi followed, somewhat tardily, the other’s lead.

‘That is so—it is quite true. We are not at all engaged. It is you who are engaged—oh yes, indeed.’

She evinced no symptoms of a desire to avail herself of their joint assurance.

‘It’s very good of you to say so, but—I’ve changed my mind. The song’s all gone out of my throat. Good-bye, Signor. Some other time.’

She moved towards the entrance.

‘I entreat you, Miss Dorrincourt, not to permit my presence here to alter in you the purpose you have formed.’

As Lazarus said this he gave the organist a push—behind the girl’s back—which induced that gentleman to take up a position between her and the door.

‘You say that you have come here to try your song. Well ! I am here ; I am ready. We will try your song.’

‘But, Signor, is it not permitted to a lady to change her mind—ever ?’

‘It is not an affair of being permitted—with you! You change your mind a hundred times.’

‘This is one of those times—the hundredth, perhaps. My mind is changed. Allow me, Signor, to reach the door.’

‘But this is the folly of a child! you are not a baby. You say that you have come to try your song, and you shall!’

She held herself a little straighter.

‘I shall!’

‘You shall try your song—yes! I say you shall!’

‘Signor Bianchi, move on one side.’

She gave a little imperious and contemptuous movement with her hand, meeting him, steadily, eye to eye. He preceptibly wavered, in another second would have suffered her to pass, but at the critical moment Mr Lazarus touched her on the shoulder from behind.

‘I entreat you, Miss Dorrincourt, not to deprive me of so great a treat.’

Under the light pressure of his finger-tips she seemed to shiver.

‘Remove your hand from off my shoulder, Mr Lazarus.’

He paid no heed to her request.

‘In pity’s name, Miss Dorrincourt, do not dash away the cup which is already at my lips. I have heard so often, from my good friend Bianchi, of your beautiful voice, that I have dared to hope that I might one day have the extreme felicity of hearing it.’

‘Request your friend, Signor Bianchi, not to touch me.’

The organist laughed vacantly.

‘It is not for me to give orders to Lazarus. Command him yourself! You may be sure he will have the greatest pleasure in doing as you will.’

So far she had remained with her back towards the over-persistent suppliant. The tips of his fingers rested lightly on her shoulders, but it was as if he had held her in a vice; it was, apparently, with an actual exertion of force that she succeeded in freeing herself from their contact. With flushed cheeks, she turned to face him.

‘Sir! You presume!’

She was going to add something further, something of a distinctly angry tenor; but, whatever it was, it was as if it were dried in her throat. Encountering the full glare of his horrible eyes, she seemed to fall into sudden confusion; the flush in her cheeks gave way to pallor; she shivered from head to foot.

As if indifferent to the effect which his glance had upon her, he continued in the same half-whining, half-sardonic tone,—

‘I, too, am a musician. Though a very poor one, after all, music is to me my life. I entreat you to permit me to listen to the music of the gods—to sing with Bianchi here, your little song.’

She put her hand up to her face, looking this way and that, as if she were feeling dazed; touched her throat with her fingers, as if there was something there which troubled her; then, with a curiously startled air, turned to Bianchi.

‘Since—since it would give such pleasure to your friend, I—I will sing to him this song.’

Her voice was not as it was wont to be; in it was a muffled cadence. As he perceived the sudden change which had taken place in her outward bearing, Bianchi, on his part, was evidently taken by surprise, and even slightly troubled. An expression of doubt came into his black eyes; he furtively crossed himself, which latter action was at once observed by Maud.

‘What did you do that for?’

The question seemed to take him completely aback. He began to stammer,—

‘It—it is a habit which—which I have at—at certain moments of the day.’

‘As a preservative against the evil eye. Is it not so, Bianchi, eh?’

Mr Lazarus’s scornfully bitter accents seemed to lash the organist as if they had been thongs of whips.

He shrank back, abjectly apologetic.

‘It is a sign of my faith—no more.’

‘Not a jot, not a tittle more. As you say, it is a sign

of your faith—in a good many things. Is it not so, eh?’

The girl’s eyes travelled from one to the other, with, in them, the same dazed look—as if, seized with a sudden access of sleepiness, she could not make out exactly what was happening. When she spoke, her voice, and the words she used, pointed to the same queer mental aberration.

‘Well—am I to sing? I would rather not. I don’t think I will; something seems to have happened to my voice—I don’t feel as if I could. I—I will sing to your friend, Signor Bianchi, some other time.’

‘Sing now!’

Mr Lazarus, stretching out both his arms, touched her with the tips of his fingers lightly on either shoulder. Looking up at him, she met his eyes. As she did so, all expression seemed to go out of her face. She spoke thickly.

‘Yes—I will sing to you now.’

Mr Lazarus turned to the organist with an air which was half jaunty, half malignant—and entirely disagreeable.

‘Come, Bianchi, Miss Dorrincourt will sing to us now. Play your little accompaniment.’

But the musician’s eyes were fixed upon the lady’s face. He seemed disturbed by what he saw there.

‘Perhaps it is as Miss Dorrincourt says, she is not well enough to sing.’ He threw out his hands with a little burst of natural passion. ‘Oh, why have you been so false to me! Tell me, are you not in a mood to sing? Pay no heed to Lazarus—pay no heed to him at all!’

She turned to him with something of the air of a timid, doubting child, which was in singular contrast to her wonted bearing of impetuous, careless, laughing disdain. She kept touching her throat, as if anxiously, with her long, white fingers, as if there still was something there which gave her trouble; and she spoke with a hesitancy which was altogether foreign to her nature.

‘To—to be quite frank with you, I don’t think that I am in—together a singing mood. There—there seems to be something the matter with my throat, and—my eyes are heavy. I—don’t think that I’m quite well.’

‘Then you shall not sing! If you do not want to, you shall not. I tell you, Lazarus, she shall not sing!’

‘And I tell you that she shall!’

As he spoke, Mr Lazarus departed very markedly from his bearing of saturnine placidity. With one of his contortionist-like movements, he inclined his body towards where the organist was standing, and seizing him with both hands beneath the armpits, lifting him clean off his feet, he held him out in front of him within a foot of his own face. The smaller man was so taken by surprise that he made not the faintest show of resistance; and when he found himself confronted by those baleful orbs, which seemed to burn themselves right into his brain, all latent notions of the sort were stifled at their birth.

Mr Lazarus repeated his own observation.

‘I tell you that she shall sing.’

He replaced the organist on his feet. The little man seemed limply miserable.

‘Very good. If you say it must be so, I suppose that it must be.’

His friend tapped him smartly on the shoulder.

‘And you will play for her the little accompaniment.’

The Signor sighed, but acquiesced. All the spirit seemed to have departed from him.

‘If you will—that is a trifle, that is nothing. I am always ready to accompany her; she knows that very well.’

Mr Lazarus, turning towards the girl, extending his long, tentacle-like arm, pointed at her with the index finger.

‘The piano is ready for you; Bianchi waits; sing!’

Twisting his arm slowly round, as if it were some boneless muscle, he gradually brought it into line with the instrument which was at his back, the girl following

the outstretched finger with curious precision, until at last it landed her, as it were, at the piano's side. Mr Lazarus then directed his attention to the organist, addressing him with considerable irascibility.

'Now, Bianchi! How long is Miss Dorrincourt to be kept waiting, eh? Do you not see that she attends your leisure? To your seat, my friend!'

The musician moved towards the music-stool with a degree of haste which was not dignified. As he seated himself upon it, he glanced up at the girl who was standing like some lovely automaton at his side, and once more the spectacle which she presented appeared to trouble him. She was so very still—she who never in his life before had he known to continue quiescent for a dozen consecutive seconds. The gaiety, the buoyancy, the joyousness, which were the characteristics of the ebullient life, youth, vigour, which were in her veins; these things seemed to have wholly disappeared. No longer was she impertinent, tender, bewitching, disdainful, all in a single breath. From her cheeks the colour had faded—the light from her eyes, the merry curves from about the corners of her mouth. Her countenance was shrouded with an unwonted gloom; a preternatural gravity, dulness, heaviness. She looked half stupefied, half imbecile, a phlegmatic fool.

The sight of these things, and the reflections they entailed, seemed to pain the particular conglomerate which the Italian called his heart. He fidgeted on his seat. Then, throwing out his hands in front of him with the familiar and monotonous gesture, he reverted to the subject which was uppermost in his mind.

'Ah, why did you betray me? Why did you tell me so many lies, declaring that your cousin was to you a thing not to be endured, and then, with perjuries fresh upon your lips, to go and promise to be his wife?—in public, Holy Saints! in public—I ask you that! What have I done that you should make of me a fool without the slightest warning?—answer me that, false one, if you can!'

It appeared that she could not, or, at least, she did

not. Instead, she put her hand up to her face, with the feeble, foolish trick she seemed to have suddenly acquired. She smiled vacantly, as if she were making a fatuous effort to collect her thoughts. Then she murmured indistinctly, as if she had plums in her mouth,—

‘I—don’t know what you mean. It—seems stupid, but—I feel so strange.’

She looked and sounded strange. A stranger, coming suddenly upon her, might have been excused for imagining that she had had too much to drink.

Rising from his seat, stretching himself across the open instrument, Bianchi began to rain imprecations on his friend.

‘What have you done to her with your witchcraft, your evil eye, your accursed evil eye? I have changed my mind; I will settle with her for the way in which she has used me myself. It is her affair and mine; it has nothing to do with anyone besides. I will not suffer the thing which you would do to her to be done. Undo it!—undo it! I tell you I will not have it done! Remove the spell which you have cast upon her, and take yourself away—far, far away—or, by the living God, I will kill you instead of her!’

In face of the other’s excitement, Mr Lazarus remained entirely unmoved. He merely shrugged his shoulders, and said, with his habitual smile, if anything, a little more pronounced than usual,—

‘Play for Miss Dorrincourt her little accompaniment, my friend.’

Signor Bianchi, shaking both his fists, vociferated in reply,—

‘I will not! I will not! I will not play a note for her, or for you either! Not a note!’

Mr Lazarus came a step forward. He lifted his arm as he had done before, only this time the index finger was pointed towards the emotional musician; and with his arm he raised his eyelids.

‘You will play for Miss Dorrincourt, my friend, at once, or I will use you worse than her.’

The Italian began to dot himself with crosses. Mr Lazarus smiled—not pleasantly.

‘They are no use, your crosses, against me; not at all. You yourself know that quite well. If you do not, I will show you. Now! Sit down and play.’

Signor Bianchi sat down. He placed his hands upon the keyboard.

‘What shall I play?’ he asked.

‘What you please. Any of those beautiful songs which you tell me so often Miss Dorrincourt sings like the angels sing; I am content.’

Bianchi played the opening bars of a song of Mozart’s.

‘Sing that,’ he said. But she was still. ‘Sing it,’ he repeated. ‘Why do you not sing it, you know it very well.’ But yet from her lips there came no sound. ‘Do you not hear what I say? Am I to play it again? What is the matter with you?’

He looked up at her askance.

Her head was thrown a little back. With the fingers she was doing something to her throat—pressing, it seemed, the windpipe. A gurgling noise issued from her throat, almost as if she was choking. On a sudden she spoke, uttering, with difficulty, a few words, as if she was being strangled.

‘I—I can’t sing—I can’t! Some—something’s the matter—with my voice.’

Leaping to his feet, the organist snatched up some music-books which stood on the piano, and, with all his force, he threw them at his friend. Mr Lazarus, drawing himself a little back, struck them with his fist, so luckily, or so dexterously, that he drove them full back into the thrower’s face. Bianchi put his hand up with a cry of pain; the blood was streaming from his nose.

‘You are a fool, my friend. You tell me again and again and again, that Miss Dorrincourt can sing like all the angels. It is all fudge; your swan is a goose. Here is the proof—you see for yourself she cannot sing a note. You are all lie! lie! lie!’

'You are a devil!' gasped the Italian, his whole attention occupied by his streaming nostrils.

'Very good; I am a devil. I will prove to you that, at any rate, I have some of a devil's power.'

So saying, Lazarus went close to the apparently already more than half-unconscious girl. Putting his hands on her two shoulders, he twirled her uncereemoniously round till she confronted him.

'Look at me,' he said, 'straight in the face.'

With rare docility she did as he bade her; her eyes turning towards him with a tremulous haste, which, in its way, was pitiful. His own eyes were open to their widest limits. They were fixed on hers with a concentrated glare which seemed as if it threatened to devour her by its sheer intensity. It seemed to hold her motionless, even breathless. By degrees a singular change began to take place in her appearance. The muscles of her face became rigid, her jaw dropped a little open, her eyeballs turned convulsively round in their sockets, leaving little more than the white perceptible. In this condition she remained, while Lazarus, for still another minute, continued to glare at her with unblinking eyes.

Then he pushed her from him as if she were some senseless thing.

'I think that will do.'

He laughed.

'What have you done to her?' demanded the musician.

'Ask her; perhaps she will tell you.'

'Maud! Miss Dorrincourt! My angel! Heart of my life!'

Bianchi addressed her warmly, thus; one hand extended, the other holding a handkerchief to his engorged nose.

But she was still; standing like some lay figure, staring, woodenly, at Mr Lazarus's grinning countenance.

'You see. She will not speak to you. Perhaps it is because she no longer desires your acquaintance.'

‘What is it you have done to her?’

‘Cast on her the evil eye.’

‘Holy Virgin!’

‘It is a little experiment I have made; a little door which I have opened into one of Nature’s hidden chambers.’

In obedience, as it seemed, to a movement of his hand, the girl, turning, crossed the room.

‘Where is she going?’

‘To kill Milord of Staines; it is to carry out the little joke which together we have arranged.’

Bianchi broke into a torrent of exclamations.

‘She shall not do it! She shall not! Dear God! I tell you she shall not do it!’

He made as if to rush across to her. Lazarus gripped him by the shoulder.

‘And I tell you that she shall.’

The girl had paused, as if waiting for further instructions. Again he moved his hand. She opened the door. Bianchi continued to struggle and to scream,—

‘Maud! Maud! Dear God! Heart of my life! Maud!’

His friend held him as in a vice.

‘You are a fool all through. It is well I am the stronger, or you would spoil all that I have done.’

The girl passed from the room.

‘You see! She has gone to kill Milord of Staines. This lovely young lady is the most perfect subject I have ever found. A singer, a musician, is nearly always a good subject. It is because they are so sensitive—their nervous system is all open. The greater the artiste, the finer the subject. But to have succeeded like this the very first time—to have inspired an innocent girl with a desire to kill her lover, that is a triumph of science—a veritable triumph, my dear friend!’

The organist persisted in his efforts to escape from the other’s grasp.

‘Maud! Maud!’ he cried.

‘You fool! What a fool you are! Do you not see

it is too late? If she has found him, he is already dead.'

In an access of playful savagery, Mr Lazarus, whirling the little man above his head, flung him in a heap into a corner of the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SIKH'S DAGGER

It was plain that Mrs Singleton was in a fever of unrest. She went to and fro between Miss Dorrincourt's sitting-room and bedroom, doing a dozen things which did not need the doing. She was all eyes and ears. Every sound, real or imaginary, seemed to make her start. Now and then, stealing softly to the door, she stood peering anxiously out into the passage, as if waiting and watching for someone who did not, who would not, come. Then, returning into the room, she stood wringing her hands, her sweet old face all troubled and disturbed, her whole frame shaken by some overmastering emotion.

'I wonder if I'm a wicked woman—I wonder if I am! I did it for the best. The position was so hard—all had to be done in an instant; there was no time to think; just at the instant it seemed so providential. If I have done wrong, God knows I did it for the best!'

Someone came into the room. She turned with a little scream. It was her husband. She hastened to him with a cry of welcome, the whole expression of her face a vivid note of interrogation.

'Charles! Have you found her? Is she coming? Is she here? Where is she, Charles?'

Her questions tumbled over each other's heels. He shook his head. She was quick to note the air of depression which marked his entire bearing. Her voice sank to a whisper.

'Charles! Don't tell me you—you haven't found her?'

‘But I haven’t. Nor a trace of her. It seems that I have been on a false scent all through.’

‘But, Charles, where can she be? What shall we do?’

He waved his hands in the air. One could see as he did so how they trembled.

‘As for where she is, I haven’t the faintest notion. I—I’m half afraid to think.’

‘Charles!’

‘As for what we are about to do, I’m beginning to fear that we’ve done more than enough already. I wish I’d never set eyes upon that girl—upon Miss Orme.’

‘She’s in the music room; the Earl is plighting his troth to her.’

‘I knew it; a pretty state of things this. A nice trick we’ve played on the Earl and on the family. If anything has happened to Miss Maud, we’ve made bad worse; if the truth does come out, I wonder what’ll take place then!’

‘But what can have happened? It’s only some freak of Miss Maud’s. She’ll be back directly. You know how sensitive I have always been to her presence? Well, I feel her now—that she’s close by—that she’s in the air. I’m sure of it. I shouldn’t be surprised at any moment to see her walk into the room. When she does come back, she’ll know we’ve done it for the best—for her sake, and—and you’ll find that she’ll be perfectly contented with everything we’ve done.’

In spite of her ardent desire to speak with perfect confidence, there crept into her voice a quaver of doubt which rather diminished the effect she intended to produce. Her husband, plainly insufficiently impressed by her attempt at assurance, stood rubbing his chin with dubious hand, his honest countenance a chaos of uncertainty.

‘I’m sure I hope she will.’

‘You hope who will what, in that hopeless tone of voice, my Singleton?’

Husband and wife seemed to jump nearly out of their shoes as they turned to find Mr Reginald Fanshawe re-

garding them from the open doorway. Their conspicuous discomfiture seemed to afford him much amusement.

‘Really, if I did not know you to be the respectable Mr and Mrs Singleton, I should have taken you to be conspirators of the deepest dye. You look the parts, upon my honour!’ He closed the door behind him as he came into the room. ‘Pray, what gunpowder treason and plot are you engaged upon?’

Husband and wife eyed each other. Both were tongue-tied. Mr Fanshawe smilingly stroked his flowing moustache with the long, thin fingers of a well-shaped hand.

‘Must I put you to the torture? Or will you unburden your conscience without compelling me to have recourse to the question?’

For once in a way the man regained the use of his tongue quicker than the woman.

‘The truth is, sir, I’ve received some bad news about—about a relation, and I—I was just speaking about it to my wife when you came in.’

Mr Singleton—an unpractised liar—lied with difficulty, which the handsome gentleman, himself a finer practitioner of the gentle art, was not slow at perceiving.

‘Was the relation in question your mother?—or your mother’s mother?—or your mother’s mother’s mother?’

Mr Singleton coughed discreetly.

‘Well, sir, it’s—it’s not exactly a relation. It’s more of a kind of a—a connection, sir.’

‘I see. It’s more a kind of a connection, is it? The policeman who locked up your great-aunt’s second cousin’s brother-in-law’s grandmother for telling stories, I presume. I understand you perfectly, and am sorry to find you addicted to falsehood. Mr Singleton, you may go.’

Opening the door, Mr Fanshawe bowed the discomfited Singleton through it, as if the shamefaced old servant had been some person of high degree. When, however, Mrs Singleton showed symptoms of following in her husband’s footsteps, he shut it in her face.

‘Not quite so quickly, Mrs Singleton, if you please.

There are one or two inquiries which I should rather like to make of you. I take it for granted that you never vary from the truth like—'

He concluded his sentence by a movement of his thumb towards the door; at which insinuation the old lady promptly bridled.

'I'm sure my husband is as truthful a person as there is upon this earth, and is well known to be such. We all of us tell stories now and then, sir.'

'That's true; even I.'

'Yes, sir; even you.'

He laughed.

'How fond you have always been of me!' The pursing of her lips and the stiffness of her bearing did not suggest undue affection. 'Now, if you'd only been as fond of Maud! By the way, where is Maud?'

'I'm sure I don't know where Miss Maud is, sir. I only know that she is not here just now.'

'Is that all you know? Indeed? I wonder!'

She moved towards the door.

'Will you be so good as to let me pass, sir? I expect Miss Maud back every moment, and there is something I must do before she comes.'

He showed no sign of budging from where he stood.

'What little game are you up to?'

'Little game, sir! What do you mean?'

'You know very well what I mean; what little game are you up to?'

'That sort of thing is more in your way than mine, sir. I'm told that only yesterday you tried to do my young lady a mischief, and your own brother too.'

'My dear Mrs Singleton, that was the purest accident. I had something in my pocket—by accident—which I left behind—by accident; and if it made a fuss—by accident—no one was hurt, so there's no one to blame.'

'It is no business of mine, sir. I only say what I've been told, and that is not what I've been told. Will you let me pass, or must I ring the bell, sir?'

He thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. A subtle change took place in the expression of his face, which

altered it unpleasantly. He addressed her with a cool insolence which seemed to suit him better than the tone of studious politeness which he had hitherto employed.

'Come, you old idiot, you don't suppose you can play the fool with me. Who's that girl out there?'

'Girl out there? What girl?'

'The girl who's pretending to be Maud Dorrincourt.'

'Pretending to be? Mr Reginald, what do you mean?'

He eyed her with scornful approbation.

'Pon my honour, I believe you're a smarter old tabby than I took you for. You've taken them in out there, you and she between you, but there's one person you can't take in, and that's me.'

'Would you mind telling me what you're talking about, Mr Reginald?'

'When you try to play the innocent like that, and pretend to take me for as big a fool as you are yourself, I feel more than half inclined to batter your head against the wall, my ancient Singleton.'

'You had better batter it.'

'Perhaps I may before I've done. There's still time. A little banging might do it good. Understand me—at present my intention's friendly. Indeed, I'm more than half disposed to come in and take a hand myself at the little game you're playing—it would amuse me very much to see Staines tricked—but I should make it a condition of my association that you should let me know what cards you're holding.'

Mrs Singleton made a little movement with her shoulders. She folded her hand resignedly in front of her.

'You are so much cleverer than I am, Mr Reginald. You forget I am such a very stupid person. I don't in the least know what it is you're talking about. Perhaps, if you will tell Miss Maud when she comes, she will understand you better.'

'Miss Maud!'

There was in his utterance of the name a wealth of contempt which she suffered to go unheeded.

‘Yes, Miss Maud. And here is Miss Maud, sir.’

As the door opened, Mr Fanshawe wheeled round to find Madeleine confronting him. Mrs Singleton welcomed her advent with evident anxiety; which the gentleman, had he not turned his back on her, would have instantly detected, and, probably, have done his best to score off. The old lady’s fingers fidgeted nervously with her gown. She looked up at Madeleine with affrighted eyes. There was a little stammer in her voice.

‘Mr Reginald was just speaking of you, Miss Maud.’ She emphasised the ‘Maud,’ though ever so slightly. It is possible that she intended to convey a hint. If so, it was unnecessary; the new-comer was equal to the situation on the instant. She came into the room without a word of greeting; then, facing him, with a self-possession which was almost insolent, she met his eyes.

‘Mr Reginald does me too much honour.’ Then, in the same breath, turning to Mrs Singleton, she presented her back to Mr Reginald. ‘Well, Singleton, I’m here again. The folks have all gone.’

‘You do it very well.’

The words came, satirically accented, from behind. She was content to glance over her shoulder towards the speaker.

‘Are you still there? Please go.’

‘After having enjoyed the favour of your attention for half a dozen seconds, Miss— Pray, what shall I call you?’

She turned to him again, sweeping her skirts about her with a little twirl. She met his smiling eyes with a smile in hers, giving him back something more than scorn for scorn. Had he been some loathsome thing, she could hardly have addressed him with greater contempt.

‘I have nothing to say to you. I wish you to have nothing to say to me. Simply go.’

‘That would be convenient to you, no doubt. It would hardly be so agreeable to me. I am afraid I must have some sort of explanation with you before I do go, Miss— Really, I wish you would let me know what I ought to call you.’

Madeleine continued for some moments to meet her unwelcome visitor's glances without showing the faintest symptom of discomposure. Then, completely calm, she turned to the anxious woman at her back.

'Mrs Singleton, be so good as to ring the bell.'

Just at that moment someone was heard approaching along the corridor.

'Stay. It may not be necessary.'

The Earl of Staines appeared at the door.

'Conrad, I'm afraid your brother must have misunderstood me. I have asked him more than once to leave my room ; but he still remains.'

There was silence. The two brothers faced each other, Reginald looking all the better because of the glitter which gave light and fire to his usually expressionless blue eyes. The Earl's sallow face was a shade darker. His square jaw seemed squarer. His lips were drawn so close together, they seemed unpleasantly thin. His tone was icy cold. He moved aside, as if to make room for the other's passage.

'You hear? Go! There are one or two matters on which I should like to have a settlement with you at the earliest possible moment. This moment is hardly convenient.'

'My dear Staines, why do you speak to me in that exceedingly acidulated fashion, as if you were endeavouring to cultivate a snuffle? I assure you there is no point on which I wish to have a settlement with you. So far as a settlement is concerned, I really think I am content to leave you in—this lady's hands. Long before she's done with you, I'm persuaded that, for all old scores, I shall be able to give you a quittance in full. I'm inclined to suspect that she's almost a match for me, and I'm sure that she's much more than a match for you. Good-bye, you turtle-doves.'

With a playful wagging of his hand, Mr Reginald took himself away, his face all wreathed in smiles. So soon as he was gone, his brother shut the door, then crossed towards Madeleine.

'Was he rude to you?'

She made a little wry face, raising her eyebrows daintily.

'He might have been—if you hadn't come. You just came in time.'

He turned to Mrs Singleton.

'Well? You know what has happened. Have you no congratulations to offer us—my future wife and I?'

Instantly the old lady was all of a fidget.

'I'm sure I wish you well. Your lordship knows I wish you well.'

He seemed to notice nothing peculiar about her manner; though she could hardly have shown greater signs of disturbance had she been persuaded that, with him, all would go ill. He held out his hand to her, she yielding him hers in return after a marked period of hesitation.

'I do know you wish me well—I am quite sure of it. And you are on safe ground in doing so, for something seems to tell me that all is going to be well. I thank you, Mrs Singleton, for all you have done to Maud in the past; and I hope, and I believe, that you will be the same true and constant friend to her in the time which is to come.'

The old lady curtseyed almost to the ground. She applied her handkerchief to her eyes. She struggled as if to speak, exhibiting all the signs of mental agitation and distress. He turned to Madeleine—probably mistaking the ground of her confusion.

'Is there anything for which you need detain Mrs Singleton?'

'No.' As Madeleine caught the dame's agitated glances, something which was demurely malicious came into her tone and bearing. 'Just at this moment I don't think there is anything for which she need allow herself to be detained.'

The old lady began to stutter and stammer.

'Are you—are you quite sure, my dear? Don't you think that perhaps you'd better avail yourself of this opportunity to—to—'

Madeleine cut her remorselessly short.

'No—I don't. I don't think anything at all. And, I'm sure, you needn't wait.'

Still the old lady seemed to hesitate, until the Earl crossed the room.

'Allow me, Mrs Singleton, to open the door for you.'

Then, in a sudden access of confusion, gathering her skirts about her, she scurried like a frightened hen through the door which the Earl held open. He closed it after her with a little laugh.

'Mrs Singleton seems to be hardly her usual tranquil-minded and motherly self.'

'She doesn't; does she?'

'And you—how do you feel?'

'I? I feel as if I were in a dream from which I fear to be awakened.'

'What sort of a dream—a happy one?'

'Yes—a happy one.'

'I am glad it is a happy one. But why should it be like a dream at all? It's real enough; am I not sufficiently substantial? And why should you fear to be awakened? What cause is there for fear?'

'In my experience of life there's always cause for fear. The future has in its hands the promise of fearful things.'

'My dear! You mustn't talk like that—now! It cuts me to the heart.'

He was leaning against the table by which she was standing. She had picked up a curious-looking dagger, apparently of Eastern manufacture, which she was twisting about in her fingers. Her eyes, possibly unwittingly, were looking down at the glittering blade; while his, with complete consciousness, were fixed upon her features.

'Maud.'

'Well?'

'There's something which I wish to say to you—which I'll have to ask you to forgive me. Say that you'll forgive me anything.'

'Yes, I will. I'll forgive you anything.'

As she said this, there was an odd note in her voice, almost like an exulting ring, which seemed to set his pulses quivering. He put out his hand, and touched her softly on the arm.

'My love!' he said, and then was, for a moment, still again. 'What I wish to say to you—for which I crave forgiveness in advance—is this: Do you know how much you've changed?'

'Changed?' She bent her head still lower. 'How have I changed?'

'How? That is just the marvel. I cannot tell you. In so many different ways.'

'Physically, do you mean?'

'No, not physically. And yet—I am not sure. I do not know if my eyes are playing me a trick—I have been asking myself the question—but, in some strange, inscrutable, indefinable fashion, you have changed physically even.'

'How?'

'You have grown'—he tightened his grasp upon her arm—'we understand each other now, so I may say these sort of things without rebuke. You have grown so much more lovely.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm sure of it. Physically, mentally, morally—at every point you're lovelier. Do you remember how untender you used to be?'

'Did I used to be untender?'

'Did you! Is it possible you don't remember? Never was a woman so transformed during the passage of a single night.'

'I'm another woman.'

'You are, indeed! And for once in a way, I prefer the new woman to the old.'

'The old was true; the new is false.'

'Lift up your eyes; look with them into mine.'

She did as he bade her, fixing her great violet orbs upon his more commonplace dark ones. In hers there was a light, a glow, a brightness, and yet, withal, a softness too, which endowed them with a beauty which was

marvellous. It was as if he could not see enough of them—as if they conveyed to him a sense of ecstasy to which he was unwilling to put a period.

“Sweeter eyes were never seen,” he whispered. ‘Nor truer! Is it possible that a woman with such eyes as those is false? I think not; at least, I think she will be true enough for me.’

‘I would like’—there was a little break in her voice—‘to be true to you.’

‘You would like?’ he laughed. ‘You shall be! Can’t you be?’

‘I would like to be!’ Again there was that break. ‘Oh, I would like to be!’

Putting his arms about her, he drew her closer to him, till their faces almost touched.

‘I love you! Do you love me?’

‘I do, with all my heart and soul. There is nothing I will not do for love of you, if God will give me strength.’

Their lips met. Suddenly, with a little exclamation, he unloosed his hold.

‘Why, you’re still holding that dagger! Do you know you’ve pricked me with it, lady mine?’

By some mischance the point of the dagger, which she had put behind her when he took her in his embrace, had touched the back of his hand. The blood was flowing freely. She went all white.

‘Did I do that? I am so sorry!’

‘It’s nothing—don’t look so concerned! It’s only a scratch. Only I do wish that in the matter of playthings your taste wasn’t quite so *bizarre*. Why, for instance, you should insist on using that as a paper-knife, merely because of it’s being responsible for the deaths of a waggon-load of men, women and children, is beyond my comprehension.’

‘What do you mean? Has this—has this killed anyone?’

She was holding out the dagger at arm’s length in front of her, as if the thing were leprous. He looked up at her with a glance of surprise.

'Of course it has. You don't mean to say that you've forgotten? Why, that's the pretty bodkin that a Sikh trooper ran amuck with at Allahabad, pinking everyone he came across, and, when he was cornered, himself as well, by way of a pleasant finish. It's odd you should have forgotten, considering how you begged it of Colonel Dauncey, as a memento, as you put it, of a lively five minutes!'

She replaced the weapon on the table, with a gesture of shuddering aversion.

'I—I'll go and look for something in the other room with which to bind your hand. I sha'n't be long.'

She flitted across the floor into the bedroom beyond, he looking after her, as if taken aback.

'How very odd! What's the matter with her? She put it down as if it were some thing of horror of whose history, until that moment, she had not the faintest notion. And I remember how she worried Dauncey into giving it her, which I believe he did do just as it was drawn from the unfortunate wretch's body. Anyhow, I know she stipulated that it shouldn't be cleaned or anything, and I wouldn't be surprised if the blood-stains are on it to this hour. Why, more than once she's threatened to stick it into me and give the blade another coating.'

As he spoke, the door into the corridor was opened, and a girl came in. He turned to her.

'Hallo! You've come back that way, have you? I was just wondering if you'd allow me to dispose of that Sikh chap's dagger, and half a dozen trophies of a similar kind which you possess, as I might see fit. Would it be to ask too much of you?'

Just at that moment the bedroom door was opened, and Madeleine, about to hasten out, hearing him speak, glancing about to see whom it was he was addressing, saw Maud standing at the other door. For an instant she was so taken by surprise that she stood as if rooted to the ground. Then, with a tremulous movement, she drew back into the room. But no sooner had she withdrawn, than, impressed by a vague suspicion that there

had been something singular in Maud's bearing, and that her appearance on the scene at such a moment was altogether inexplicable, urged by an instinct which she could not have diagnosed, she re-opened the door an inch or two, and so remained an unseen witness of all that followed.

It was plain the Earl had not the least idea of the substitution that had taken place. When Maud received his remarks with perfect silence, he looked at her as if surprised, and noticed that, as he supposed, she had on a different frock to the one she had just been wearing; but even that only moved him to comment on the rapidity with which she had made the alteration.

'Why, you've changed your frock. How quick you've been; that shows what you can do when you like. On a future occasion, when you take three-quarters of an hour to arrange a hat-pin, I'll quote that frock against you. See what a weapon you've put into my hands! But, talking of weapons, won't you present me with that collection of horrid trifles which you have hoarded, I believe, out of pure perversity, and permit me to signalise our betrothal by giving them the *coup de grâce* they so richly merit. I am bound to assert that, in my judgment, they're hardly the sort of things one would care to live with. Come, lady, what do you say?'

The lady in question said nothing. She stayed for a moment at the open door, in an attitude suggesting a curiously statuesque rigidity. Then, without a word, she advanced towards him in an odd, jerky, undulatory fashion, as if her movements were automatic, and her limbs actuated by springs. As she came, he did perceive that there was something singular in her appearance.

'Maud! What is the matter with you? Why do you look at me like that? Maud! Tell me! What is wrong?'

She did not tell him. She told him nothing. She moved towards him, with her strangely distorted features, and the whites of her eyes all showing; and then straight past to where the dagger was lying on the table. She took it up; then turned again to him. He held out his

hand, as if supposing that she intended to accede to his request, and intrust it to his keeping.

‘Come—that’s right! Give it to me. Such a gruesome relic will be better in my charge than in yours.’

But when he saw the way in which she looked at him, or, rather, the way in which she did not look at him, but stared right past him with dreadful, glassy eyes, he fell back a step.

‘Maud! What has come to you all in an instant? What is wrong? Maud!’

That was the last word he spoke, and that was a cry of love. She stuck the dagger, once the property of that homicidal, suicidal Sikh trooper, into his side; and without a groan he fell to the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

STABBED TO THE HEART!

IT was all done in an instant, without the slightest warning. The blow was delivered, the weapon driven home, the Earl lying on the floor, before Madeleine, watching through the three or four inches of the open door, had the most elementary premonitions of what was about to happen. And when it had happened, it was a moment or two before she was able to realise what it was that had actually taken place. Her feeling was one of petrified amazement—of sheer stupefaction. The most extraordinary of all the extraordinary things which had chanced since her entry into that fateful house had been done before her very eyes—so incredible a thing that it seemed her sight, her senses, or something, must have played her false. Maud's bearing had been so quiet, so self-contained, so gentle, so unassuming, so wholly void of any hint of an offensive purpose, that it was impossible that, out of pure devilry, mere wantonness, she could have done this thing; Maud Dorrincourt, the woman in whose image she herself had been so marvellously moulded!

And yet the man who, a moment before, had been so full of life, and love, and hope, lay on the floor so still.

Madeleine woke, with a gasp of horror, to the knowledge that this thing was fact, and not part and parcel of some hideous dream.

Throwing the door wide open, she rushed into the room.

'Maud! Maud! Maud!' she cried, repeating the name again and again. 'What is it you have done?'

But her eyes were not for the woman, but the man. Although he lay there so still, it was as though his presence filled the entire room. She reached his side—bent over him; it was dreadful to see him lying there so motionless. She called him by his name.

‘Conrad! Conrad! has she hurt you very much?’

Yet he was still. Her voice died in her throat. She called to him again.

‘Conrad! Conrad! speak to me!’

But he did not speak. He continued in that awful quietude. It seemed as if her heart was shrivelling up within her; her veins running dry; her whole nature being changed. She did not recognise her own voice when she spoke again.

‘Maud!’ she screamed. ‘Maud! Go and tell them to send someone here! Go and tell them!’

None replied; no one moved. She sprang to her feet in a sudden paroxysm of rage, driving her finger-nails into the palms of her hands in her insensate fury.

‘Maud! Go and tell them to send someone here! Do you hear me? Ma-a-ud!’

She screeched rather than screamed, dragging out the name as if it were a polysyllable. But again there seemed none that paid her any heed. She looked round her like a thing possessed, and, for the first time, realised that she was alone with It.

This discovery seemed to restore her, after a sort, to her senses. As if unable to credit the evidence of her own eyesight, she looked round and round before she was willing to admit that she was alone. The thing was so. Maud had vanished. But where? and when? and how? Madeleine had not been conscious of her moving—she had not seen her go. She had supposed her to be still standing on the same spot of ground from which she had struck her victim down. Madeleine had to rub her eyes and to look again before she was actually sure that the room was vacant.

Then, on a sudden, she thought of the secret door. There was the secret of Maud’s mysterious disappearance; through it she had fled.

Irrationally enough, the reflection that this was so filled her with a resentment against the girl which was far greater than anything which had gone before. To have struck her victim down—God or the devil alone knew why!—was crime enough; but to have fled like a coward—that to Madeleine, in those first wild, chaotic moments, seemed to stamp the deed with a brand of blackness worse even than the crime itself.

She put her hand up to her throbbing temples, striving to collect her thoughts. What was she to do? She glanced down again at the silent figure. Its appalling stillness appealed to her with a sudden overwhelming sense of pathos. The tears gushed to her parched eyes. Falling back upon her knees, in the whirlwind of her emotions, she would have stooped and kissed him; only—he was so still.

He had fallen a little on his right side, so that his right arm lay stretched out hopelessly, helplessly, beside him; there was an eerie eloquence in the way in which it was twisted, with the palm turned upwards; the whole position being suggestive, under ordinary circumstances, of muscle-knotting cramp and extreme discomfort. His left arm was under him, serving as a lever to place the body still more on the opposite side. He was lying stomach downwards. In falling, his left cheek had been the first to strike the floor, so that his left side and his right cheek were uppermost, the position giving him the appearance of a twisted neck.

The more Madeleine regarded him—and the sight, judging from her fixed and stony glare, seemed to have for her an irresistible fascination—the less she liked what she beheld. For some cause, the long, slender blade, which had so grim a history, had snapped in two. The handle lay upon the floor, while less than half an inch of steel protruded from his side. All about this remnant was a crimson flood, which grew larger and larger, welling out as if it were being pumped from the man's unconscious heart.

It was the sight of this increasing stream which moved Madeleine at last to action; for, as she glared and stared,

she began to realise that the man's life-blood was flowing from him while she looked on. Leaping up, rushing to the door, she began to shout and call with the full force of her lungs. Presently people came hastening to her from either side.

First to arrive was Mr Singleton, puffing along as fast as his stout old legs would carry him. He drew up at the sight of her standing shrieking in the doorway.

'What's the matter?' he demanded.

'The Earl!' she gasped. 'The Earl!'

Pushing her unceremoniously aside, he passed into the room. Seeing the prostrate figure, he rushed towards it with a cry.

'Mylord! Is your lordship ill? What has happened? What is the matter with you, my lord?'

Then, perceiving the broken dagger and the blood, he started back as if he had been struck a heavy blow.

'He's been murdered! Murdered! My God!' He rushed to Madeleine, shaking as with the ague. 'Who did it? Tell me who did it? Do you hear? Who did it?'

Seizing her by the wrist, he drew her towards him till their faces almost touched. She stared at him with apparent lack of recognition. He persisted in his inquiry.

'Who did it?' he repeated.

They were brushed aside by others who came hurrying in, men and maids; and among them Mrs Singleton. When she beheld the recumbent peer, she broke into exclamations, as her husband had done, echoing him almost word for word.

'His lordship's murdered! Oh, my God! Who has killed his lordship?'

The members of the household seemed to have lost their senses—the men and the women alike. They wrung their hands and exclaimed, stared and trembled; but they did nothing. The man whose fate they bemoaned might be dying while they wailed, for want of the succour which no one offered. The horror of the shock had unhinged their minds.

Old Singleton still held Madeleine by the wrist. His wife went to her—with his inquiry,—

‘Who killed him? Who killed him?’

Madeleine was about to answer when the words froze on her lips. A sudden flood of thought came scurrying through her brain. If she were to tell the truth, what would be the result to Maud? Would they not seek for her high and low, break down the outposts of her hiding-place, drag her out, pillory her in the face of all the world, and perhaps hang her in the end? Despite appearances, some inner voice seemed to whisper to Madeleine that her act was not so heinous as it seemed; that something was behind it; an explanation which might serve even as an adequate excuse. All at once a sense of loyalty towards the girl in whose shoes she actually and literally stood blazed up within her bosom; she registered an unspoken resolution that she would not by word or deed betray her, until, at any rate, she had herself been afforded an opportunity to declare the truth.

So, when Mrs Singleton again pressed her question, Madeleine simply tightened her lips, and looked at her with lack-lustre eyes. Her silence, however, had an unexpected effect. The old lady came nearer. She searched her countenance with eager, inquisitive glances; the muscles of her face seemed all to be working at once. Her voice was low, and harsh, and husky.

‘Did you kill him?’

‘I!’ Madeleine gasped. Then the absurdity of the suggestion moved her to incongruous mirth. ‘Is it likely I should kill him—when I loved him so?’

Singleton struck in with a commonsense interpolation.

‘You love his lordship! Don’t talk such nonsense. How could you, when you only saw him for the first time yesterday?’

Madeleine turned to him with startled looks. Was it possible that she had only seen him for the first time yesterday, and that all these things had been crowded within those few hours? Why, it seemed as if these happenings had been the events of years, and as if she

had known him all her life. Of one thing she was sure, he would be the central figure in her life, henceforward, to the end.

The end? Why, while they dallied, chopping phrases, the end might already be at hand, and they were doing nothing to stall it off! She turned passionately on Mr Singleton.

‘Why do you do nothing but stand and talk? He may not be dead. I don’t believe he is dead, but if he does die, and you do nothing, his blood will be on your hands! On yours!’

Suddenly Reginald Fanshawe came into the room. He stood just inside the door, looking about him at the agitated servants as if he found their excitement more than a little amusing.

‘What is the matter?’ he inquired. ‘What is the meaning of this irruption, and the noise?’

No one answered, but Singleton and some of the others moved aside, so that he saw the figure on the floor.

‘Staines!’ he cried.

Going quickly forward, he stood looking down at his brother with a puzzled look upon his face, as if he could not make out what was the meaning of his lying there so still.

‘What has happened? Staines, what has come to you?’ Then he saw the broken weapon and the blood; his puzzlement seemed to increase. ‘Who has done this?’

Singleton chose to take the question as addressed to himself. He began to tremble and to stammer.

‘You must ask—you must ask—her.’

He motioned with his hands towards Madeleine, Reginald following the indication with his eyes.

‘Her? Does he mean you? Who has done it?’

Madeleine glared at him like a creature distraught, her clenched fists held close to her sides.

‘Why do you ask questions now? There will be plenty of time for that. He may be dying while you chatter. If he does, you will have done it—you!’

Reginald smiled, as if the situation was beginning to have for him a psychological interest.

'I see. Your logic is your own. If he dies, because I have had nothing to do with his death, I shall have killed him. It's a sort of syllogism. But he may be already dead; what then?' Kneeling, he leant over his brother. 'It's been a workmanlike stroke.' He picked up the handle, which had snapped away from the blade. 'From what I remember of this interesting toy, he's been spitted with a good six inches of cold steel. It suggests hearty digestion if his stomach's got the better of such a morsel. Don't you think so, cousin?'

She had come close up to him.

'Is he dead?'

'Do you think he's dead?'

'You have killed him among you if he is!'

'The logician again! Let's see if the crimson stain is really on our bloodless hands.' He laid his hand on his brother's side. 'It's odd, but his digestive organs do seem to have proved the stronger—he breathes. Why, he even moves.'

As he spoke, the Earl did make a faint attempt at motion, which presently became more perceptible—he tried to turn. Reginald was at once on the alert.

'It's all right, Staines. You continue to lie still, like a good boy; we'll do all the moving that's required.' The Earl's lips twitched, as if he were endeavouring to speak. 'And don't chatter; there'll be plenty of time for asking questions a little later on.' The speaker gave a malicious glance towards Madeleine, then turned to the servants. 'Now, some of you men, go and fetch a board—an ironing-board, or something of that sort, will be best, and move yourselves! Singleton, send someone for a doctor, or half a dozen, and see that at least one of them is here inside of sixty seconds. My dear cousin, I'm afraid that the patient will have to be borne into your own bedroom. You must forgive me for turning it into a hospital for the time.'

The servants, once directed what to do, were quick enough in doing it. A board was brought, and the

Earl was being carefully carried on it into the adjoining room, when Lady Hildegarde appeared. Her eyes behind her glasses seemed more prominent than ever, and her voice more strident.

‘What is this that I am told? Gracious! Is that Staines? What is the matter with him?’

Reginald turned toward Madeleine with one of his sweetest smiles,—

‘You had better ask—dear Maud.’

‘Maud! What is the matter with Staines?’ Madeleine replied through her clenched teeth, looking at Reginald, while replying to Lady Hildegarde,—

‘He has been stabbed.’

‘Stabbed! stabbed! stabbed! Staines!’

The Lady Hildegarde’s voice rose in a penetrating crescendo.

Her son put his hand upon her shoulder, addressing her with a bland smoothness which seemed to invest his words with a meaning which they themselves did not convey.

‘Hush, my dear mother! The time for emotion is not yet.’

Presently the doctors came, three of them, hard on each other’s heels. There ensued an interval of suspense. They made their examination in the inner room, while Madeleine remained alone without, and waited.

Still her brain seemed numb. What had been done had been done so quickly, and had come upon her—defenceless, unsuspecting, unprepared—with such overwhelming, such hideous force, that as yet she was unable to focus the rush of events so as to observe them in their proper sequence. While the next act of the tragedy was being enacted behind that closed door, she stood helpless, hopeless, crushed, waiting, she herself could scarcely say for what.

Presently, falling on her knees, with bowed head, and hands tightly clasped in front of her, she began to offer voiceless petitions unto God. The effort brought her a measure of relief; it at any rate enabled her to

some extent to disentangle the chaos of her thoughts. She prayed for the man who had been brought suddenly so close to death, for the woman whose hand had cast him in this plight, and for herself. It was a formless prayer, scarcely logical. If only the prayers of the logician prevailed, there would be but the outer darkness of despair left for the prayerful.

As she prayed someone came out of the inner chamber. It was Mrs Singleton. As she glanced at the girl upon her knees, she started back with an exclamation as of horror.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Praying.’

Madeleine answered with the directness of a child. But her reply seemed to fill the other with an added sense of horror. In her voice there was a note of repugnance.

‘Praying! You—you wicked girl!’

The girl’s lovely eyes opened wider—as if involuntarily.

‘Wicked! For praying?’

‘Yes—for praying! That such as you should venture to pray. You dreadful creature! To dare to mock your Maker! I had never thought that such wickedness existed. I wish I had died before I set eyes on you—to be so like my darling, and yet to be so different! It is you who have brought all this upon us!’

‘I! What have I done?’

‘You ask me! With his blood wet upon your hands!’

‘His blood—wet—upon my hands?’ She held out her hands with a simplicity which was again reminiscent of childhood, examining them askance, as if in expectation of finding on them the vital proof of the other’s words. ‘There is no blood upon my hands.’

‘You—lie!’

As if goaded to madness by what she judged to be the girl’s fictitious appearance of perfect candour, with a sudden fury which was altogether foreign to her usual hearing, she struck her with her open palm a savage blow

upon the cheek. Madeleine reeled, all but fell ; then, smoothing with the tips of her fingers the place where the blow had fallen, glanced up as if surprise had deprived her of the power of speech.

At that moment the bedroom door was opened. A procession issued forth. In the front came a tall, portly, grey-whiskered, bald-headed gentleman, who, advancing towards her with outstretched hands, raised her from her knees, and addressed her with a degree of emotion which irresistibly recalled the old-fashioned stage father in the presence of his child.

‘My dear, dear child, how I feel for you—how I feel ! That you should have been so visited on this day of all days ! Wonderful are the ways of Providence. Yet we have cause to be thankful—great cause.’

Madeleine perceived that this was a doctor—though his manner was unlike that of any member of his profession she had come across.

‘Will he live ?’

She asked the question with bated voice, palpitating heart, tremulous lips, yearning eyes, which signs of emotion he noted with a benignant smile, which seemed to cover the whole of his countenance. He patted her hand, which he retained in his, with a mixture of gallantry and jocularly which, on the whole, became him tolerably well.

‘He will, I hope and believe, for many, many years. You have no cause for fear, my dear young lady, none at all. Had the weapon deviated from its present course, had it moved a hair’s breadth to one side, the result might have been fatal ; we should have found ourselves once more in the presence of the Great Mystery. But, as it is, I think I may venture to pledge my professional reputation that no evil results will follow ; that is, if he receives proper attention, which he, of course, will do, and is not allowed to exert himself unduly. If our patient is only reasonable, which I am sure his lordship will be, all will be well. You have much cause for thankfulness, my dear young lady.’

‘She has.’ The echo came from Mr Reginald, and

conveyed a volume of meaning which the physician ignored, as it seemed, almost ostentatiously. He continued to regard the girl with the same benevolent smile.

‘His lordship wishes to see you, as is only natural.’

She moved a little back.

‘To see me?’

‘Yes, alone.’

‘Alone?’

Her face went white. His expression never changed.

‘He stipulates to see you alone, as, again, is only natural. If you do not remain too long, and do not let him become agitated, and, above all, do not allow him to move, there is no reason why he should not be allowed to have his way. He expresses himself upon the point with such vehemence that it will probably be more prudent to concede his wish than to risk the agitation which would result from an attempt to baulk it. So, my dear young lady, with your permission, we will not keep him waiting any longer. I’ll be bound that your impatience is as great as his own.’

Before she realised the full drift of his proposal, or could offer any sort of expostulation, the doctor had slipped her arm through his and was leading her towards the bedroom. As he opened the door she passed inside, closing it behind her; he left her standing just within the threshold of the room.

A voice came to her from the bed—the voice which she knew so well. The sound of it set her heart in a tremor.

‘Who is there?’

‘It is I.’

‘Come closer.’

She went closer, her knees seeming to shake beneath her as she moved. She felt each moment as if her limbs would refuse to perform their office of holding her upright. A face regarded her from the pillow; she knew, although for some cause she could not look at it, that it was white and worn and wearied, as if it had been overtaken on a sudden by age and suffering, and

perhaps disillusionment. The eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon her features, while hers were cast down, as if affrightedly. There was silence, and in the silence a flood of thought swept over her. She thought of the false position in which she stood—of what she really was, and of what she was pretending to be; of the impudent imposture she personified. Abashed, ashamed she stood, like some conscience-stricken wretch who stands self-condemned at the bar of justice.

The stillness was interrupted by his question.

‘What did you do it for?’

She started, making a frenzied effort to collect herself. She was conscious that he could hardly have grasped the true inwardness of the situation. Then she remembered to what his inquiry actually referred.

‘I did not do it!’

‘Maud!’

The tone in which the name was uttered was half supplicatory, half accusatory. Words rushed to her lips, but did not pass them. She would have given much to have been able to say she was not Maud, but she could not.

‘Why is it necessary to lie to me? Do you think I did not see you do it?’

‘Do what?’

She passed her hand across her brow dazedly. His tone changed—it became bitter.

‘Have you forgotten that I saw you try to drive your dagger to my heart? Do you suppose I am stone blind? Or is it on my stupidity you count? Why did you resort to such a drastic measure? Was it because I permitted myself to suggest that the dagger should be entrusted to my keeping—that it was a little out of place among a lady’s *bric-à-brac*? If so, don’t you think that the punishment was almost greater than the crime?’

‘I did not do it.’

‘Why do you lie to me? Why do you lie?’

‘I am not lying.’

He half rose in bed. She recalled the doctor’s warning.

'Don't move! You are not to move. The doctor says you are to lie still.'

'Why?'

'For your health's sake. You may do yourself an injury if you are not careful. The doctor only let me come in on condition that I did not let you move.'

His features were distorted by a smile.

'I hope, for the sake of human nature, that you are the most amazing example of hypocrisy the earth has seen. For you to feign solicitude for my health after what has passed, betrays a love of make-believe which is beyond my comprehension. All your life you have played with me. Knowing how I have hungered for you, you have made of me a jest, until at last, I suppose in sheer wantonness, you thought you would let me see how desirable a creature you indeed could be. And then, when you had intoxicated me with sudden, undreamed-of happiness, you chose that very moment to slip off the mask, and—my God!—to try to butcher me! Is it because the stroke did not go right home that you're once more at the game of pretence?'

She stood, with her face half turned aside from him, lacing and unlacing the fingers of her two hands with feverish energy. Her voice was husky. She spoke beneath her breath.

'I did not do it.'

'Don't lie to me. Tell me why you did it. Let me try to understand the reason which was present in your mind, so that, for once in our lives, we may, if possible, see eye to eye. But don't add to your sin the sin of all the sins. Child, tell me why you did it.'

'I did not do it.'

'Are you stark mad? Or do you really believe that I am? Is not the feel of your blade still in my side? How long ago is it since I saw it darting at me in your hand?'

'I did not do it.'

'With what a nausea the sight of me must fill you, with what a sense of hatred, that you should persist in such a lie, at such a time, with such an air! You give

me the key I'm seeking, for it's plain I must be to you a thing of unutterable loathing if, because of me, you make of yourself so poor a figure. Good! My life's to me of little worth. It's in my brother's way, and if it's so much in yours, I'll put to it a point. I've but to tear away these bandages, and it'll be a case of suicide instead of murder. So all of us will be contented.'

Sitting up in bed, a position which he attained with difficulty, he began to loosen the bandages which were about his waist. Rushing to him, throwing herself on her knees at the bedside, she caught his wrists with both her hands.

'Don't, don't! You don't know what you are saying! It's all a mistake! I love you; I would die for you at this moment!'

'You would die for me? Yes, having killed me first. But I will save you from that predicament by making certain of a verdict of *felo de se*.'

He continued to fumble with nervous hands at the linen binding, showing in his purpose a resolution which appalled her. She broke into shrieks.

'Don't, don't! Help, help!' she cried.

CHAPTER XV

PUT TO THE QUESTION

HELP arrived upon the scene in time to prevent the Earl from carrying out his design in its entirety, but too late to stop him from doing himself serious mischief. Indeed, the physician who dealt in platitudes was so far moved to bluntness as to declare that he had probably done himself more injury than he had received from the weapon. For this Madeleine was made to feel, by their bearing, glances and innuendoes, that she again was held responsible.

Mrs Singleton put it plainly. In the midst of the first confusion she drew the girl aside.

‘You had better go now, while there still is time.’

Madeleine looked at her askance.

‘I don’t understand you.’

This irate, viperish old lady was quite a different being from the sweet-faced, soft-spoken person Madeleine had hitherto known. She began, *sotto voce*, to abuse the girl with the volubility of a fishwife.

‘You wicked creature! To keep on pretending in such a way. First you try to kill him, then you try to make him kill himself; him—the best and kindest gentleman that ever lived, whose shoes you are not fit to wipe! Hanging would be too good for you, and it’s hung you’ll be if you don’t take care! If it wasn’t that I’m to blame for giving you an opportunity to show what a dreadful wretch you really are, I’d denounce you on the spot. But, as it is, I’ll give you a chance to save your skin; so take to your heels while yet you may, and take

yourself outside the house. I wish to Heaven you'd never darkened its doors !'

'Is it possible that you are under the impression that it was I who attacked the Earl of Staines ?'

Mrs Singleton held out her hands with what was meant for eloquent protest.

'Hark at her ! To listen, and to look at her, one would think that she was the best and greatest lady in the land, instead of being—what she is ! It's no wonder she's imposed on every soul in the house. It's my belief she'd impose upon an angel !'

The old lady's vituperation acted on Madeleine like a cold douche. Drawing herself upright, she resumed her natural dignity of bearing, confronting her assailant with a quiet self-assertion and conscious rectitude which took the other aback.

'Not for the first time, Mrs Singleton, we misunderstand each other. You brought me here to play the part of an unwilling puppet, because it was your whim. Since I was so weak and foolish as to allow myself to fill the part which you proposed, you imagine that there is no depth to which I cannot sink ; that I can, first, stoop to murder, and then be willing to snatch at a chance to run away, as you put it, to save my skin ! In at least the latter supposition, I will prove that you are wrong. There was a time when I was willing enough to go. Then you wouldn't let me. Now I am unwilling. With, or without, your approbation, I propose to stay, in order to show you that I am not the kind of person you apparently imagine me to be.'

She walked into the other room, with her head in the air, leaving Mrs Singleton to stare after her open eyed.

Later, there was held a sort of informal court of inquiry. There was present the Dowager Countess, who, on being informed of what had chanced to her grandson, had insisted on straightway going to see him, demanding of him point blank who was responsible for placing him where he was. On this point the Earl, with perfect courtesy, declined to give her any enlightenment. Whereat the old lady turned, raging on all about her,

and now sat, bent double in an arm-chair, her chin between the two sticks on which she had propped her hands, all agog to learn the why and wherefore of his lordship's indisposition.

By her stood the Lady Hildegarde, her eyes flashing behind her spectacles like two live notes of interrogation.

At one side sometimes sat, but oftener stood, Mr Reginald Fanshawe. He conducted the examination in chief, assuming the whole management of the case, and endeavouring, as it were, to turn darkness into light. With him was a tall, slightly-built gentleman, who had an air of such excessive youth as to cause one to begin by suspecting its authenticity, and end by believing him to be at least the co-equal in years of any person present—not even excepting the Dowager. Mrs Singleton hovered somewhere in the rear, and now and then Mr Singleton made his presence rather felt than seen.

Before them all stood Madeleine, the one person on whom all eyes were fixed—Reginald addressing her with that sort of jocularly which is felt to be, and is meant to be, insolence in its most insidious form.

‘My dear cousin, we are actuated by two desires—one is to avoid scandal, and the other is to have some notion of whereabouts we are. Staines declines to give us any information, so we are obliged to come to you. We know that you can tell us all about it, and we are quite sure you will—I in particular am sure. Allow me to introduce to you Mr Augustus Champnell, a very old friend of mine.’

The excessively young-looking gentleman, with about him the indescribable suggestion of age, bowed. Madeleine treated him to a frigid movement of her head, which scarcely amounted to a nod.

‘He is a gentleman in whom you can place perfect confidence, and used to bear a part in delicate affairs. I have ventured to ask him to favour us with his company on this occasion, in the assurance that he will act as the friend of all the parties. Now, to begin, I believe that you were present when Staines—met with his accident?’

Madeleine was silent, while they waited for her answer. She was standing, her right foot a little advanced, her arms hanging straight down at her sides, her head held a little back, perfectly self-possessed, in front of the battery of their glances. Her cheeks were a little white, her lips were compressed, there was a slight distension of the pupils of her beautiful eyes—these were the only signs of mental disturbance she betrayed. She did not look at Mr Fanshawe while he was speaking, but, when he ceased, she turned to him with something in her expression which was more than a trifle contemptuous. Her voice was low and clear.

‘At present I can give you no information.’

‘My dear cousin! At present? What are we to understand by that?’

‘My meaning is quite clear.’

‘But how long is your “at present” likely to continue? When will you be willing to give us the information we require?’

‘Very soon. It may not be necessary for me to give it you at all. You will probably be able to learn all you wish to know from—other sources.’

‘You are enigmatic. But, in the meantime, you can have no possible objection to telling us whether you were present when the accident occurred.’

‘I decline to tell you anything at all.’

‘Don’t you see that by your refusal you are placing yourself in a very invidious position? That you are compelling us to draw conclusions which are hardly to your advantage?’

‘I am indifferent to any conclusions you may draw.’

Her emphasis on ‘you’ was pointed.

‘That is very good of you, my dear cousin.’ The meaning of the stress which, in his turn, he laid on ‘cousin,’ she understood perfectly well. ‘Still, I fancy you scarcely realise the serious position in which you may be placing yourself. When people have accidents with daggers, the law is apt to have a disagreeable knack of asking questions, to which it is well to be prepared with answers.’

Her lip curled.

‘I am not a child.’

‘My dear cousin, that is the last thing of which we should dream of accusing you. It is because we know you to be so fully equipped with all the discretion of age that we make our appeal with so much confidence.’

The Dowager’s grating tones interposed. She had kept her gleaming eyes fixed on the girl unblinkingly.

‘Look at me, girl.’ Madeleine turned towards her. They faced each other—youth and age. ‘Did you stab him?’

‘I did not.’

The answer came direct and instant, producing an evident sensation, as though each one who heard it had been taken by surprise.

‘Did he stab himself?’

‘He did not.’

Again the reply was prompt.

‘Then who stabbed him?’

This time there was a momentary pause, not apparently so much of hesitation as for consideration.

‘That I decline to tell you.’

‘Do you mean that you can’t or won’t?’

‘I won’t.’

The refusal, though blunt enough, was not by any means uttered with an air of defiance. It was spoken, unfalteringly, rather as if the speaker had arrived, without fear or favour, at a final resolution after due consideration. The Dowager continued to eye her for a second or two, then turned to Mrs Singleton, who was hovering about in a conspicuous state of fidgets.

‘Singleton, who stabbed him?’

Plainly taken aback by this sudden address, Mrs Singleton’s fidgets perceptibly increased. She rubbed her hands feverishly together, she shuffled from foot to foot.

‘My lady, I can’t tell you!’

‘Do you mean that you can’t or you won’t? I’ll have no nonsense with you! Answer me!’

‘My lady, I don’t know!’

‘What do you know?’

‘My lady, I know nothing!’

‘Don’t lie to me!’

‘My lady, it’s quite true. Singleton was in the room before I was.’

‘Singleton? Where’s Singleton?’

Singleton was in the background, and now came to the front, not looking by any means at his ease.

‘Singleton, who stabbed the Earl?’

‘My lady, all I know about the matter is that I heard’—there was an obvious pause; then he committed himself—‘Miss Maud calling for help, and when I got to her, she was standing at the door, and his lordship was on the ground.’

‘Was anyone else in the room?’

‘I saw no one.’

‘Did anyone pass you as you went to it?’

‘No, my lady.’

‘Did anyone leave it after you were in?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

‘What did Miss Maud say when you reached her?’

Singleton reflected.

‘I believe she said, “The Earl!” as if she was frightened. I went into the room, and I saw what had happened, and I asked her who had done it.’

‘Then what did she say?’

‘She said nothing; she made no reply.’

‘Is that all you know?’

‘Yes; that is all I know.’

‘I don’t believe you. Don’t flatter yourself I do. I believe you and your wife could tell us more if it suited you. You’ve made a practice of deceiving me for years; I’m quite aware of it. I may have something to say to you later. Now leave the room—the pair of you.’

They left the room with a crestfallen air. Singleton tried to bear himself bravely, and he succeeded better than his wife, but still looked very far from happy. When they were gone, the Dowager returned to Madeleine.

‘Come here, girl.’

The girl went close up to the old lady's arm-chair, looking down at the hawk-like eyes which gleamed up at hers with an air which, if a little troubled, was still fearless, and even a trifle scornful.

'Answer me again, and think before you speak. Did you stab Staines?'

'I did not.'

'You swear it?'

'I say that I did not. If you will not believe my plain assertion, you are hardly likely to do so merely because I supplement it with an oath.'

'That's true enough.' The old lady seemed to be turning something over in her mind. 'Was it an accident? Were you two engaged in some tomfoolery or other, and was it done between you? Is that the explanation of what you're trying to turn into a mystery?'

Madeleine reflected—in her turn.

'I cannot tell you.'

'Then, in Heaven's name, what can you tell me? What can anyone tell me? Here's Staines tongue-tied, and you'll say nothing. Is murder to be nearly done, and are you to keep it to yourselves? Come, girl, be honest! I've come to feel for you, all at once, what I had thought that I should never feel; when one has had no feelings all one's life, at my age they're not apt to grow into sudden being. But something seems to have come into your face—to have come all over you, which has moved me with a new sensation—with a desire to be on terms with you. So tell me plainly, like an honest woman, did you try to kill him? Frankness will be better for you in the end; he's not going to die, so you need have no fear of what will follow.'

'I have no fear. So far from trying to kill him, I would have given my life for his—and would do so now.'

'Either you lie like truth, or your truth is very like a lie. Here are you two in a room alone together. He is stabbed. You say you did not do it; nor he. How, then, came the thing about?' Madeleine was silent. 'This sudden fondness which you feign for him is sus-

picious, after the way you've used him all these years.' Again Madeleine was silent. 'Did you quarrel?'

'No.'

'Do you still pretend you care for him?'

'I love him.'

Though the girl's face and neck were crimson, there was nothing about her bearing which suggested that she was in any way ashamed. Indeed, as she withstood the hot fire of the old woman's shrewd questioning, she seemed to carry herself with an added pride.

'You love him?—since when?'

'Since yesterday.'

'It's a sudden growth.'

'Yes; it is a sudden growth.'

'And will die as suddenly.'

'It will not die.'

'Think how you have blown cold, and now blow hot—yet you dare say that?'

'I shall not change.'

'But you have changed.' Madeleine was silent. The Dowager was also still, seeming to be endeavouring to read, with her unblinking eyes, the girl's face, as if it were a printed page. 'You're a lovely jade, whatever else you are; and in some queer way the devil looks as if it had gone out of you, and the soul of goodness come instead—or my eyes are playing me a trick for the first time since I've had them. Well, a girl's a weathercock, and it's all the better if the wind has blown you round towards loving him—though you need not try to kill him to show your love.' Madeleine held her peace—which did not content the Dowager. 'Why did you try to kill him?'

'I did not.'

'Tell that for a tale! You've lied to me too often for me not to know it's not a trifle that would choke you. However, if Staines is content, and it seems by his talk as if he were, it's your affair and his, and there's many a marriage has had quite as queer an introduction as the lady's sticking a knife into the gentleman.'

Mr Fanshawe, who had been listening with a smile of

almost too obvious amusement to the dialogue between the old woman and the young one, now moved a step forward, caressing his moustache as he spoke.

‘Permit me for one moment to make a suggestion. I think it is just possible that I have hit upon the key to the mystery.’

His grandmother did not receive his interpolation with any show of geniality.

‘It’s no affair of yours that I know of, though it would be against nature to expect you to keep your fingers out of other people’s pies.’

He assumed an appearance of pain.

‘No affair of mine! When my brother lies suffering from a felon blow!’

The old lady stared at him in silence for a second, then uttered an exclamation expressive of profound contempt.

‘Do you think to take me in with such talk as that? You to prate of “felon blows” and your “brother”! Why, man—if you are a man, which sometimes I mis-doubt—you’ve spent your life in striking “felon blows,” and most of them against your brother. The only thing for which you are grieving is that he isn’t dead, instead of being all the better for a little letting of blood.’

Mr Fanshawe placed himself in an attitude which he possibly intended to be expressive of injured innocence.

‘It is not the first time I have been misjudged; I fear it may not be the last. But no amount of injustice will cause me to deviate from what I believe to be my duty, and my duty constrains me to say that I quite believe that this lady had no hand in placing Staines in the condition in which he is.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

The gentleman addressed himself to Madeleine with a courteous inclination of his head.

‘Shall I explain—or will you?’

The girl met his mocking glances with unflinching eyes.

‘I am indifferent to what you do—or say.’

‘You are at least a lady of infinite courage.’

‘And you are a man of none.’

'Of a calibre so unusual that, against my better judgment almost, you have me on your side.'

'The fates forbend that the "almost" ever may be "quite."'

He went closer to her, speaking hurriedly beneath his breath.

'Which is it to be? Say quickly! Friends or foes?'

She stretched out her arm, as if to ward him from her.

'Foes! foes! always foes!'

He bowed mockingly.

'Good. The cast is against you, of your throwing, not mine.'

The Dowager ruthlessly interposed.

'What is all this rubbish talk between you two? Come, man, out with what you have to say, as straight as your crooked tongue will let you.'

'My dear grandmother, you always pay me compliments; one more or less makes little odds.'

'Speak, man, speak, or follow Singleton. A little of you soon tires.'

The fashion in which the gentleman kept his countenance under what some might have felt to be trying circumstances did him credit. He pointed the old woman's plain language with another bow.

'I merely wish to observe that your ladyship has been made the victim of as ingenious, and also as impudent, a conspiracy as ever yet I heard of. Who is at the bottom of it I don't as yet quite fathom, though I have my suspicions.'

'I never knew you when you hadn't, and I have mine of you.'

'It is very good of you to say so; but that, at this moment, is not the point.'

'It is—with me.'

'Will your ladyship permit me to explain?'

'Explain, man, explain! You keep on explaining, and never reach the explanation.'

'With your permission, I will reach it now. This lady—'

Mr Champnell suddenly advanced.

'Excuse me, Fanshawe, but were I you, I would allow the lady to be her own spokeswoman.'

'You have heard me offer her the opportunity, which she refused. I will give her the choice again.' He turned to Madeleine. 'Will you speak, or shall I?'

'At your bidding I will not say one word.'

'It is not a question of my bidding. One of us must speak; the question is whether it shall be you or I.'

'That is not the question. You must understand that I know you.'

'And I know you.'

'You mistake. I am not sufficiently contemptible to come within your ken.'

'At least you are more than sufficiently brazen-faced.'

The girl quivered; she bit her lip. Mr Champnell put his hand on the speaker's shoulder.

'Come, Fanshawe, you must not speak like that. I think that after all it may be you who are mistaken. There are one or two things of which I should like to speak to you if you can spare a minute. If you will give the lady time for consideration, unless I am in error, she will herself say all that is requisite, and say it better than you could.'

'I have given her time enough already, and more than enough.'

'Give her a little more. Come, Fanshawe.'

He slipped his arm through Reginald's with an airy certainty of manner, as if the matter was signed, sealed and settled. Mr Fanshawe turned on him with a sort of snarl.

'Champnell!'

He looked—and sounded—as if he would have liked to say more of a forcible kind. But, perhaps, something which he saw in his friend's eyes—they were at such close quarters they could not but see each other very clearly—induced him to change his mind. A perceptible alteration did take place in his demeanour; he assumed a sudden air of entire acquiescence.

'Come,' said Mr Champnell.

And, without another word, the two gentlemen went,

Mr Champnell holding the door open to allow his friend to pass out.

So soon as their backs were turned, the Dowager, with a curiously mirthless grin, looked at the girl who still was standing in front of her.

‘Well, young woman, what’s the meaning of the little comedy? What is the mystery that’s in the air? Which is the thread that unravels the skein?’

Madeleine was silent. She did not seem to have recovered from the home thrust which Reginald had dealt. Her lips kept quivering, and her eyes were dim. Which things the keen-sighted old woman noted.

‘What ails you, girl, that all at once you’re puling? Those who use their claws must look for scratches. That’s a kind of game at which a woman is likely to be worsted, play she never so shrewdly.’

‘I know it—well.’

There was a new note of bitterness in Madeleine’s voice. The Dowager continued to concentrate her gaze on her, the uncannily gleaming eyes seeming as if they would pierce her through. It was some moments before she spoke again.

‘You’ve changed, my lass, more than a snake that’s new cast its skin. It’s queer. As our dear Reginald says, there’s a mystery in the air, of which, if I were you, I’d be rid as quickly as you can.’

‘I will.’

‘Ay, do. Mystery’s another game at which, in the end, a woman seldom scores. Be off—and when I see you again, let there be a clearance of the air. I am too old to be able to breathe at my ease in fogs.’

Madeleine, thus unceremoniously dismissed, went away, feeling much like a dog might feel which carries its tail between its legs. She was conscious of a sense of humiliation—which stung. She was aware that she was suspected by some of an attempt upon the Earl’s life; and, by others, was known to be guilty of something which she realised might be easily held to be worse. Never, in her most sordid moments of privation and of poverty, had she conceived it possible that she could

have sunk to such a depth as this. Wherever she looked she saw herself confronted by exposure, punishment, shame—a threatening brand of infamy which should so mark her that all who ran might read, and which nothing could erase.

As a fitting crown and climax, the man she loved—loved! God help her, that such as she should dare to love!—the man she loved was fully persuaded that it was her hand which had endeavoured to take away his life, and was being watched and guarded lest, in the fulness of his persuasion, he did his best to end what he supposed her to have left unfinished. What thoughts he must be thinking of her, as he lay there, brought so suddenly and so foully low by the woman, as he conceived, who, in the same instant, had been breathing to him vows of love. She writhed with shame and agony at the mere contemplation of the picture conjured up by her own imagination.

Oppressed by such reflections, she entered the room on the other side of which he lay, and in which so much and such fateful history had been made in so short a time. Scarcely had she crossed the threshold, and was looking about her with dull, pain-worn eyes, than the wall on the opposite side seemed to start clean open, and out of its very thickness, as it appeared, someone sprang.

It was Maud Dorrincourt.

CHAPTER XVI

A DECLARATION OF INNOCENCE

SHE had a roll of music in one hand. As she came out of her hiding-place, she glanced quickly around her. At sight of Madeleine she drew a little back, laughing softly.

'You! From where have you sprung? I thought no one was here.'

Maud's sudden appearance had taken Madeleine un-awares. Her thoughts had been occupied upon such widely different themes that it gave her a sense of shock. And, as she noted the young lady's light-hearted bearing, her careless tones, her merry laughter, some dissonant note seemed struck within her own brain which almost stunned her. Putting her hand up to her brow, she gazed at the other stupidly, speaking as though there was an impediment in her speech.

'I have only just come in—this moment.'

Maud came hurrying across the room, waving her roll of music in the air.

'Why, sister mine, what a sober face you wear. Are you tired of playing at being me, that you look as if you were borne down by all the troubles of the universe? And you've only been at it for a dozen hours. Think of what I've endured as the occupant, during all the long passage of the years, of the berth of which already you have wearied, and take pity, dear!'

Madeleine gasped. She felt as if, all evidence to the contrary apart, that she must be dreaming. That this girl, who chattered like some volatile, light-hearted child, who had never known what it meant to come into contact with the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil, could be the creature who so short a time ago had perpetrated so dastardly a crime seemed indeed to be incredible. It was to Madeleine as if the foundations of the world were giving way beneath her.

‘Maud, how can you talk like that?’

‘Why, my dearest, I take it it is because I was built that way. But how can you talk like that? I hope it’s not for the same reason? Because you remind me of nothing so much as the lady in the melodramas who never opens her lips without a clutch at her throat and a gasp.’

Madeleine imitated the action of which Maud spoke with such derision; she put her hand up to her throat and gasped.

‘Maud, don’t! I must speak to you—I must!’

‘Well, my sweetest, must, and so you shall! Let’s go to the music room. That’s where I hold all my *tête-à-têtes* just now. I’m going to pour out my soul in song, which at this moment is attuned to sacred numbers—see!’ She flashed a sheet of music before Madeleine’s startled eyes. ‘“I know that my Redeemer liveth!” that’s a song for you, when sung! and you shall hear me sing it.’

Brandishing in the air the melody, the words of which Madeleine had learned to associate with her most hallowed memories, throwing the door wide open, Maud ran out into the corridor. For the second time Madeleine followed her guidance to the music room—again without meeting anyone upon the way. Once inside, Maud scampered across the floor, humming some gay air. In the gallery she would have immediately begun to sing had not Madeleine stayed her.

‘Maud, I must speak to you before you sing—I must!’

‘Then, my pet, speak on.’

‘Maud, why did you do it?’

Madeleine’s voice sank to a whisper, which, whether she would or would not, was uncomfortably tremulous. To her the question was ‘big with the fate of Rome.’ The other, however, ignored her earnestness altogether, treating her inquiry with a rattle of frivolity.

'Because the spirit moved me, I suppose—or what serves me as the spirit. Though, as a rule, it's wisest not to ask me why I do a thing, because I never know. I do it, and it's done for me; that's enough, and sometimes more. After the event I have occasionally asked myself why I did a thing, and wished I hadn't. But never, under any circumstances, have I burdened myself with such a useless inquiry before. Any other information can be had while you wait.'

'Maud!'

'Madeleine!'

'Why did you do it?'

'My poor child, how exceedingly, how deplorably grave we are! Is it indigestion? Or is it because you've had too much of Staines? In the latter case, even an exaggerated gravity is only to be expected. I, who speak—I have been there!'

'How can you talk of him like that?'

'My gracious! How would you have me talk of him? As the Emperor Fee-fo-fum, or as the Sultan of Rum-titum?'

'After—trying—to murder him?'

'That's nothing. I have been trying to try to murder him since the day when first we met—in an amateurish, dilettante sort of way. But the mischief is that I've never got beyond the trying, as a more level-headed person might, would and should have done.'

'You call it nothing to try to stab him to the heart!'

'Well, perhaps that hardly does deserve to be called nothing; it is an appreciable sort of quantity when you come to think of it.'

'You wicked girl! You are the most wicked person I ever heard of; your wickedness is beyond anything of which I ever dreamed!'

Madeleine had flared into sudden passion, and, moving a step or two away, glared at the other with flaming eyes and heaving bosom. Maud, plainly taken aback by the sudden outburst, stared at her as if she were some curiosity which she was encountering for the first time.

‘My goodness gracious! Am I really? How nice it must be to have come upon a unique specimen at last!’

‘You laugh at me, and jibe and jeer, with blood upon your hands.’

Maud repeated Madeleine’s own gesture, when accused by Mrs Singleton; she held out her hands in front of her, turning them over and over, regarding them askance.

‘Blood upon my hands? On the inside or the out?’

‘It is not possible that you can be human; you must be some thing of evil in a woman’s shape, since you can persist in making a mock of such a dastard crime.’

Maud rested her hands on the little shelf against which she was leaning, smoothing out the sheet of music with her fingers and glancing quizzically at Madeleine, as if she suspected her of playing a part, the meaning of which she was trying to unriddle.

‘My dear, dear twin sister, what a state you must be in! It must be cucumbers, if it isn’t Staines! Let us sing, or, rather, let me sing, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” It will help to clear the air; and, believe me, it needs some clearing.’

‘Not that song! At any rate, you shall not sing that song!’

‘Indeed? Why not? What’s the matter with the song?’

‘You to sing that you know that your Redeemer liveth!—you!—with the stain of murder on your soul!—of which you make a jest!’

Maud, folding her hands in front of her, turned towards the speaker with an air of patient resignation.

‘My sweetest Madeleine, are you mad?’

‘You must suppose I am, or you would not treat me as if I were an utter fool. Even you can hardly seriously expect a third party to regard your act in the same jocular light in which it seems to appear to you.’

Maud turned still more towards Madeleine, and she sighed.

‘There seems to be some method in your madness—

if you're really mad. There appears to be some haunting impression in your mind that I have done something. In the name of all that is fortuitous, what have I done?'

'You ask me that—you! It is plain that, as I say, you regard me as a fool; and, perhaps, what you have seen of me warrants your estimate. But there is a point at which even my folly stops.'

'And that point is?'

There was silence. Maud, her hands gracefully clasped together, regarded the other with a pleasant smile which seemed to drive Madeleine almost to the verge of imbecility. Her breath came in short gusts; her fists clenched and unclenched; it seemed that it was with an effort she kept herself from assailing her smiling double with actual violence.

'I believe you are a devil!'

Maud's smile grew rather more than less.

'How like me you are, even when you're in a rage. It's really most remarkable. But—why devil?'

Madeleine threw out her arms with a movement of dismissal.

'So be it. It will come back to you in the end. You may laugh now, but you will weep before you've done. I have been charged with your sin; I am not sure that I have not been threatened with the police. Mrs Singleton would chase me from the house into which she dragged me. Even he thinks that it was I who struck him. If you have decided that, so far as you are able, I am to bear the weight of your offence, God help us both! Yours will be the greater punishment, after all; for you cannot cheat God, even if you succeed in cheating man. Whatever comes, I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that, as you know, that in this matter at least, my conscience is clean, as are my hands.'

She stretched out her hands with a touch of sudden pathos, and turned to go. Maud watched her as she went. When she had gone a step or two, she called to her,—

'Madeleine!'

The girl, stopping, looked round.

‘Well?’

‘I really begin to think that, after all, you are in earnest. You must forgive me for laughing at you, because you speak in such a very dramatic way. But I don’t understand you, child. You forget that I have been shut up in my donjon tower, and know nothing of what has been passing in the world below. What mysterious thing has happened, and what deed do you suppose me to have done of such a very dreadful kind?’

Again Madeleine’s eyes began to blaze.

‘Why do you talk to me like that? Why do you?’

‘I won’t laugh at you again—at least, I’ll try not to; though you don’t know what a tempting object you seem to me to be. Evidently something very curious is in the air, which, at present, is quite beyond my comprehension. Please tell me as plainly, and also as calmly as you can, of what, in your judgment, I stand accused.’

‘You stand accused! Accused! How long is it since you tried to stab your cousin to the heart?’

‘I! Tried to stab my cousin to the heart? Madeleine! You must be mad!’

‘I had rather be mad ten thousand times than such a thing as you. He lies there, with the wound in his side into which you drove that dreadful knife, and he thinks I did it—that I came to him, with his kisses fresh upon my lips, with them all aflame with burning words of love, and tried to take his life. And you, who did it, you stand here and laugh at me, pretending you don’t understand. God’s curse will light upon this wicked house. Would that I had died before I had ever seen it! For since I knew it yesterday, I seem to have entered into the inner chambers of sin, and to have been drawn into the very gates of hell.’

‘Madeleine, I thought I was feather-brained; but you go beyond me altogether. You don’t know what you’re saying; or, if you do, I don’t. Has there been really someone stabbed?’

‘You pretend again to ply me with your questions—past mistress of dissimulation! Yes, there really has

been someone stabbed, and by you! by you! by you! I suppose that now you will deny it was by you?’

‘If you are making such an accusation in earnest, which I find it hard to credit, if you are sane! I do deny it altogether.’

‘So it is as I imagined, and you do propose to shuffle away from the consequences of this thing which you have done under cover of a lie. But perhaps you are not aware that I saw you do it.’

‘You saw me—stab my cousin?’

‘I was standing at the open bedroom door, and was just returning into the room in which I had left the Earl of Staines when you came in.’

‘When I came in?’

‘I heard him speak to you, and you returned no answer. He thought you were me, and spoke of how quick I had been, as he supposed, in changing my frock, and you were careful not to undeceive him. I saw you take the dagger from the table, and him hold out his hand for it, and how you drove it with all your force into his side. Perhaps, as you say, you were not aware that there was a witness of all you did.’

As Madeleine continued to speak, the envenomed words pouring from her lips as if they were so many missiles which she was hurling at the other, the fashion of Maud’s countenance began to change. It commenced to assume a look of odd vacuity; the light faded from her eyes—the expression from her features. When Madeleine ceased, she looked about her with an air of unpleasantly strenuous attention—as if her faculty of hearing were strained to the utmost.

‘What was that?’

‘Duncan’s funeral knell.’

‘Wasn’t it someone calling?’

‘If so, it was the voice which called to Cain.’

Maud, putting her hands up to her face, as if to veil her eyes, began to shiver as with a paroxysm of sudden cold. She moved closer to the other’s side.

‘Madeleine, where are you? Don’t leave me! I’m feeling so afraid!’

‘At last!’

‘What do you mean by at last? It is so strange. I cannot explain, but—I seem to have gone through all this before. I don’t know when—it’s as though I had woke out of a kind of nightmare.’

‘Still acting? Is it because you’re an actress through and through? Only an actress, nothing real!’

‘Why do you speak to me so cruelly?’

‘What is your standard of cruelty? Don’t you think it was cruel to drive that knife into your cousin’s side?’

Maud looked at her askance. It was plain that that wave of curious emotion was passing over her. She drew herself up, with a little movement of disdain.

‘I believe you are mad. Whether this queer tale of yours about someone being stabbed is, or is not, a pure invention, I cannot say; in any case, I am not interested. You know, all the world knows, that I am indifferent to whatever may concern my cousin Staines. If he has had an accident, that is his affair, and if you like to make it so, yours. Cry over him, if it pleases you, to your heart’s content; but don’t plague me with your melodramatic posing.’

‘Suppose I go from here to the police, denouncing you for murder; what then?’

‘You rave!’

‘It is not your fault if it was not actual murder. You did your best to drive the knife well home.’

‘My queer creature, I am beginning to think that after all you cannot be so very much like me. I don’t believe I ever drivel.’

‘I am not at all like you, thank God.’

Maud shrugged her shoulders.

‘No doubt you have something to be thankful for, only do go and be thankful somewhere else, and let me sing!’

‘You shall sing in a moment, if you dare, and God will let you. Only let me understand you clearly before I go. Is it your unalterable determination

that, so far as you're concerned, I am to be made to bear the brunt of your offending? That, in other words, you intend to take advantage of the superficial likeness which exists between us, to give the world to understand that what you did was done by me; that the innocent is guilty, and the guilty innocent?'

'Look here, Madeleine, to descend to the vernacular, I believe you're cracked. When I first set eyes on you, I was ready to jump out of my shoes with joy. I took you in my arms. I am willing to take you in them again this moment, though you do seem to be turning out to be nothing but a bundle of prickles. What bee you have in your bonnet I haven't the faintest notion; or whether you're subject to delusions. But, if Staines has been stabbed—and, saving your presence, the bare suggestion seems to smell of the "sacred lamp"—I can only say it wasn't I who stabbed him. I'm no stabber, and haven't had the slightest inclination to enter that line of business since I saw you last.'

'You appear to continually forget that I saw you do it. You carry yourself with such an air of honesty that you begin to impose on me until I remind myself that I did see you with my own eyes.'

'Then, my dear girl, you must have been seeing double. Why, I haven't seen the man for a week or more. As I live, it's true. I'll swear it to you in half a dozen languages if it will give you any sort of satisfaction.'

'It gives me no satisfaction to hear you perjure yourself.'

'You stand there like a Rhadamanthine judge with a poker down your back. What a female Brutus you would make! Unfortunately it's the humour of the situation which appeals to me, because the sure fact is that if you did see what you thought you saw, there must be visions about, and it was my wraith which made itself visible to you in that singularly ostentatious fashion.'

'The puzzle is, why you should wish to lie to me. I can understand why you might wish to lie to others,

but why to me? It makes no difference. You know I saw you, and I know I saw you; to persist in a denial of the plain fact when we are quite alone together seems to be pushing deception to an unnecessary length.'

'My most charming Madeleine, what do you wish me to do or say? Do you wish me to go to Staines and observe, "My dear boy, I've felt like stabbing you over and over again, and now I've done it, or my wraith has, and if you'd like to have a prod at me to make things even, why, you're welcome." Is that what you want me to do? If it is, I've half a mind to do it right straight away, just for the sake of smoothing out your ruffled feelings.'

Madeleine was still. She was examining the girl in front of her. Noting the careless air of frankness with which she spoke, to suppose it false suggested almost supernatural powers of duplicity. Her own assurance wavered. She began to wonder if it was not possible that she might have been guilty of an injustice after all; if her eyes, in some inexplicable fashion, had not been playing her a trick. Even a momentary doubt occurred to her as to whether there might not be something in the girl's wild words, and if, as she put it, it was her 'wraith' which she had seen.

She was conscious of an overmastering desire to reach to the bottom of this strange business; to ascertain how much was true and how much was false about this being of wondrous loveliness. She looked all innocence. Was it possible that beneath that garb of purity was a monster of iniquity?

Madeleine's manner became more collected. She put her questions with a calmer intonation. It had become her one desire to bring the truth to the light.

'Your statements and mine are in direct conflict. I believe that I saw you do this thing. You say that I did not. If you really mean what you say, you will be desirous of proving that I am wrong. In which case you will have no objection in explaining how you have spent the day?'

'Not the least in the world. Come, I'm ready. Fire

your questions, sweetest! This grows interesting. I've often wondered what it felt like to be cross-examined. Now I'm going to know.'

She pushed herself on the shelf which ran round the gallery, so that one foot dangled in the air. Madeleine found her irrepressible frivolity difficult to combat. She herself was so oppressed by the horror of the thing that the other's persistent refusal to treat it seriously galled her into frenzy. Her tone, in spite of herself, was harder because the other's was so light.

'When did you first leave that hiding-place of yours?'

'Well, I'll tell you. Let me think. I don't want to be caught tripping, and then to have you fasten on me a point blank charge of perjury. First of all, I came out to cheer you up. I thought you would want cheering up before you went, you know! before you went to promise to marry Staines by way of being deputy for me; but you were gone. And it seemed that you didn't stand in any need of cheering up, because I stole after you, and, from a corner of my own, I saw the show!'

'You saw the show?'

'Yes; wasn't it fun? Goodness knows what would have happened if anyone had chanced on me, but nobody did. I never enjoyed anything so much in my life. You looked so much like me that more than once I was positively startled—it was so supernatural; there were little tricks of yours which reminded me of myself in a way that was quite miraculous. And you looked—yes, you looked every bit as lovely as I myself could have done; and I am not sure that, in a way, you didn't look lovelier. You did me the greatest possible credit, my dear, and as I looked at you I realised for the first time in my whole existence how positively charming I myself must be. Well, when the show was over I went—'

She paused, and, as she did so, the same odd change took place in her expression which had obscured it before. It seemed, all in an instant, to become apathetic and dull.

'I went—it's very odd!—let me see, where did I go? I went'—she put her hands up to her brow, as if to aid

her memory—‘I think I went to see Bianchi. Do you know, it’s very singular, but I don’t seem to remember what happened while I was with Bianchi; it seems all muddled.’

‘What happened after you left him?’

Maud rapped her temples with her knuckles, as if violence would put in motion the apparently dormant powers of her brain. She glanced up at Madeleine with a look of half-comical bewilderment.

‘I can’t remember! It really is very queer indeed, but I can’t! The next thing I can actually recall is finding myself back in my donjon tower, though whence I came or how I got there I don’t seem to have a notion. By the way, I do remember this, that when I discovered where I was, I myself wondered how I had got there. Perhaps I had been walking in my sleep. Do you think I had?’

‘You went into what you call your donjon tower with your cousin’s blood wet upon your hands. When I caught you in the act, you fled for your life.’

‘Is that so? Dear me! how very odd. Then from that do you infer that I did the shameful deed while walking in my sleep? Is there anything of that kind upon the records—of the Newgate Calendar, for instance?’

Madeleine’s attitude was expressive of the disgust she felt. This tergiversation, this dexterity in shuffling, as she felt it to be, seemed to her to be almost as horrible as the crime itself. She turned away with a movement of uncontrollable contempt.

‘To talk to you is to waste one’s time. I can only conclude that in you the moral sense, if ever existent, is long since dead. It is quite plain that you are altogether void of any perception of a difference between right and wrong.’

She moved towards the staircase which led down into the body of the hall. Maud called after her.

‘My dearest Madeleine, what an extraordinary style of speech you do appear to keep in stock. You don’t mean to say solemnly that you don’t believe me?’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘But I do hope that, merely on that account, you are not going to place me under a ban of excommunication. I’ll tell a lie—I really will!—rather than you should think I am untruthful.’

‘Thank you. I should not wish to put your powers in that direction to an unnecessary strain.’

‘Then I’ll sing to you—you little horror!’

And, in a moment, she broke into song. The magic of the melody filled Madeleine with a kind of intoxication; her pulses throbbed, her heartstrings seemed to quiver. But she moved across the room without pause or stay, never pausing to look back when she reached the door, rushing from the room with the music of that marvellous voice ringing in her ears, as if to mock her. When she was without, she leaned against the wall, pressing her hand against her side, trembling so that, even with the support afforded by the wall, it seemed to be all that she could do to be able to stand.

Hardly had she taken a dozen steps after she had to some extent recovered her self-control, when a voice addressed her from behind.

‘So it is you, is it? I find you again, after all. You and I will understand each other, if you please, alone together—where there is no Lazarus to interfere.’

The speaker was Signor Bianchi.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SIGNOR IS ASTONISHED

MADELEINE, still tremulous, turning, looked at the Italian without, for the moment, quite realising who he was, or what he said. He, on his part, was in the usual excitable condition it seemed it was his wont to be. His words stumbled over each other in their haste to be uttered.

‘It is good that I find you—very good—most excellent! More, it is about time. I look for you everywhere—up and down—all over the place! You are nowhere—oh, no, there is nothing to be seen of you—not a thing. Until now—just when I am going what you call stark, staring, raving mad.’

He appeared to be in a state of singular agitation. His big black eyebrows went up and down; his eyes rolled, his head twirled about on his shoulders; his whole body was in continual movement, as if it had been hung on springs. His volubility added to Madeleine’s bewilderment. She allowed him to grip her wrist, and to lead her through an open door into a room which she had a misty consciousness was littered with all sorts of odds and ends, without offering the faintest remonstrance. It was his own apartment—the one in which Mr Lazarus had illustrated in such an uncomfortable manner what he called odic force. The Signor banged the door behind him. Madeleine sank, limply, on to a chair on which there already was a pile of music; whereon Bianchi, crossing his arms upon his chest, stood in front of her in an attitude which suggested fury rather than grace. He showed an inclination to indulge in vain repetitions.

'So! It is you! At last! As I have said! There is now an opportunity for you to explain what you mean by treating me with such monstrous cruelty—me, whose soul is all tenderness, who would not hurt a fly! You will now be able to make me understand what is the meaning on your lips of deceit, falsehood, ingratitude, black-hearted treachery; to let me know if you are indeed a woman or a thing of horror! I wait for you to tell me these things as you see. I am at your service, I attend only your convenience.'

Madeleine's only response was to rise from her chair. Her manner was as cold as his was very much the reverse.

'Be so good as to let me go.'

Springing to the door, he prevented its being opened by placing his back against it.

'Never! never! I give you my word, until you have told me all that I have a right to demand. We shall understand each other altogether, at last, I promise you, before you leave this room.'

He waved his hands in the air as he was speaking, as if he were doing his best to shake them off his wrists.

Madeleine, momentarily regaining more and more of her composure, began to eye him as if he was some sort of curiosity.

'You are making a mistake.'

Off went his hands again, wiggle-wagging in the air; they seemed to be in constant danger of dislocation.

'It is a mistake I make, no doubt; it is not the first, but I swear to you that it shall be the last—there shall be no more mistakes between us two. I desire—I command you, therefore, to tell me why you have played with me the fool, why you have lied to me as if you were a thing of infamy—to tell me now at once!'

Madeleine reflected. It occurred to her as being at least within the range of probability that this man had had something to do with Maud Dorrincourt's crime. It was even possible that it was he who had been the direct incentive; that he had actually urged her to the act. She resolved to commence to break through the tangled web of misconception in which she had become

ravelled, by giving him clearly to understand who and what she was.

‘The mistake you make is in supposing me to be Miss Dorrincourt.’

The words were clearly uttered; yet that they conveyed no meaning to his mind seemed evident. He stood staring at her with knitted brows, as if she had addressed him in an unknown tongue.

‘What is that you say?’

‘I say that the mistake you make is in supposing me to be Miss Dorrincourt. I am not. I am no connection of hers. I am a stranger to her. She had never heard of me, nor had I heard of her, till yesterday. I am Madeleine Orme.’

The musician’s brows still were knitted—as if he was struggling with some knotty point, the solution of which was beyond his mental capacity. Then, moving quickly towards her, putting his hand upon her arm, he said, with a degree of earnestness which placed his sincerity beyond all question,—

‘What a liar you are!—what a liar! Or’—as a doubt seemed to cross his mind—‘is it that you are mad?’

Madeleine smiled faintly in spite of herself. The little man’s bluntness, coming so clearly from his heart, seemed to appeal to her sense of humour.

‘I am not a liar on this occasion. Nor am I mad; I almost wish sometimes that I were. It is the simple fact that I am not Miss Dorrincourt. Look at me closely. Do you mean to say that you cannot see for yourself that I am not?’

He did as she bade him; thrusting his face within six inches of hers; searching her features with eager, yearning, staring eyes.

‘What new lie is it that you tell me, Maud? Why do you tell me such a lie? You must be mad!’

‘Can you not see that I am not she whom you call Maud!’

He made a hurried movement backwards, sweeping his hand before his eyes—as if to brush away some threatening illusion.

'It is impossible!—it cannot be!—it is not a thing to be believed! If you are not Maud, who are you, then?'

'I am Madeleine Orme.'

'Madeleine Orme? Who is Madeleine Orme?'

'Nothing and no one. A creature picked out of the gutter to play the part of great lady for a day.'

'I do not know what you mean; what you say is beyond my understanding. It is a new game you play with me, Maud?'

He flung his arms above his head with a frantic gesture of appeal.

'I cry to you out of my soul for mercy! I ask you to remember how often I have told you the story of my love, with what willingness you have listened to me, and all that you have promised. I asked you not to forget—'

Madeleine interrupted him.

'Don't you think it is unwise to talk in this strain to a perfect stranger?'

'A perfect stranger! You dare to call yourself a perfect stranger! Maud, is it possible that you are such a one that you will even deny that you are yourself?'

'My good man, I tell you that I am not Maud. And it seems to me that you can scarcely have such an intimate acquaintance with the lady as you pretend, if you are unable to discover that fact for yourself. A man who knows a woman as well as you would have me believe that you know Miss Dorrincourt, is surely able to detect the imitation from the real.'

He went three or four steps backward, as if to be able to observe her from a more advantageous point of view. By degrees, as he continued to stare, there seemed to enter into his mind the beginnings of doubt.

'I do not believe you are Maud—I do not believe it; she would not speak to me, she would not look at me, like that. And yet, you are Maud! You must be Maud! It is another game you play with me! It is altogether impossible that two persons can be so like each other.'

'It is one of those impossibilities which have an inconvenient knack of translating themselves into facts.'

The thing's a freak of nature—nothing more. Providence has seen fit to make me, in externals, so like Miss Dorrincourt, that even to me the resemblance seems incredible. You must know that it's almost as much a novelty to me as it is to you. I'm still in a state of continual surprise.'

'But—if what you say is true, and you are—who do you say you are?'

'I am Madeleine Orme—who is no one in particular.'

'Where, then, is Maud?'

Madeleine considered, and decided that, on the whole, it might be more prudent to leave the question open.

'I am not Miss Dorrincourt's keeper.'

'So! And you—what is it that you do here?'

'I have been pretending to be Miss Dorrincourt.'

'You have been pretending to be Miss Dorrincourt? In the name of Heaven! Since when have you been pretending—it is a funny way in which you put it—to be Miss Dorrincourt? I am beginning to think I dream.'

'On the contrary, you are just commencing to awake. I have been playing at being the lady in question since yesterday.'

'Since yesterday!'

Bianchi gave a dramatic start. In an instant every part of his body seemed to be in simultaneous movement.

'Is it possible—can it be that it was you? You who this morning engaged yourself to marry the Earl of Staines?'

The young lady's countenance went a shade paler.

'It is quite possible.'

'It was not her?'

'It was not her.'

'Holy Virgin! It is incredible, a thing not to be believed! And he, the Earl, he thought that you were Maud?'

'There is reason to suppose it.'

The girl's tone was dry.

'All the company of saints! Was ever such a comedy?'

What a creature you must be ! What a woman, to play such a trick before all that crowd of people !'

'I must be an absolutely shameless person, mustn't I ?'

Two bright red spots were burning on Madeleine's cheeks. The musician's ingenious outspokenness stung her nearly to madness.

'It is not only that, but what a boldness, what a courage, what a—what a—'

'Boundless impudence ?'

'Yes ; all that, indeed ! I have seen something of women—of curious women—you may take my word for it ! But you are altogether beyond them all—altogether ! My gracious ! my gracious !' He struck his temples two or three times smartly with his open palms. 'It is a veritable comedy ! You are like one of the valets of Molière !'

'I thank you. I trust they were agreeable persons.'

'They are the most impudent rascals the wit of man ever conceived—the most barefaced !'

'I thank you still more.'

She dropped him a curtsey, her face flaming.

'That is if you are not Maud, of which I have still a doubt.'

'You need have none ; on that point you may take my word.'

'Then it is a marvel, a true miracle, that the good God should have made two persons so like each other ! But what a burden you lift off my heart ! what a weight ! And what a wrong I have done to my dear Maud—in my thoughts ! But how was I to know there were two of you ? No one had spoken a word to me, not a hint. How was I to know it was you, and not she ? You would have deceived the devil himself. But now that once more my heart is alive, my soul revives. What a rapture to think that after all she is the angel—the true angel—I have from the first supposed her. And after you had engaged yourself to the Earl you came in here to Lazarus and to me ?'

'Pardon me, but I did not.'

He spun round on his heels.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I am merely replying to your inquiry.’

‘I say that you came in here to Lazarus and to me.’

‘And I say again that I did not.’

‘Who was it, then?’

‘That I cannot tell you, unless it was Miss Dorrincourt.’

‘Miss Dorrincourt? Miss Dorrincourt?’ His jaw dropped open. The muscles of his face began to twitch. Suddenly rushing at her, he threatened her with his clenched fists. ‘Do not dare to say it was Miss Dorrincourt! It’s a lie! a lie! a lie! It was you! You are all lies.’

She made a little movement with her hands.

‘Possibly; but, on this occasion, I happen to be speaking the truth.’

‘Swear to me it was not you?’

‘This is the first time I was ever in this room.’

He looked at her long and fixedly. Something which he saw in her face seemed to drive the light all out of his. His hands fell to his sides. Staggering back, he stumbled over a chair. Sinking on to the seat, his head dropped forward on to his chest. In a moment he had become a picture of dejection. His voice was sepulchral.

‘My God! my God! my God!’ he groaned. ‘We are undone, altogether—she and I! And it is you who have done it—it is all you! You are a wicked, wicked, wicked woman!’

‘Granting the general proposition, how do you propose to make it out in this particular instance?’

‘I supposed, as all the world supposed, that it was she who had promised herself unto the Earl—that she had foully betrayed me. Was I not a witness with my own eyes? I was beside myself with rage. I exclaimed that I would have his life, and hers. Lazarus took me at my word. When she came in here he said to me, “I will arrange for you a perfect revenge. I will put it in her heart to kill him with her own hand—to kill him with a knife!” I was not unwilling, for I believed that she had betrayed me at first.’

‘Go on!’

The girl had woke to sudden interest. She had advanced a step or two closer to him, and was exhorting him to continue with voice and gesture. He had paused, he was covering his face with his hands.

‘After all, she had come to me with a heart all truth; and he cast on her the evil eye!’

‘Who did?’

‘Lazarus!’

‘What do you mean by the evil eye?’

He looked up at her with glowering eyes.

‘You ask me such a question! you, who have cast the evil eye on all of us!’

‘Never mind me; go on with what you were saying. Who is this Lazarus?’

‘He is my friend; or, rather, he was my friend. He is now my greatest enemy. When I see him, I will not answer for myself. He is a witch, a wizard—I know not what you call it. He cast on her a spell. He declared to me that he would put it into her heart to kill the Earl. He was as good as his word; she was as wax in his hands—as wax! I saw it with my eyes. If she were to find the Earl—which the saints forbid!—I believe that she would thrust in him a knife, because of what Lazarus put into her heart.’

Madeleine’s heart died down within her; heavy weights seemed to be dragging at her limbs. For some moments she was speechless. She began to have an inkling of what it was that had really happened; to realise the position in all its horror.

‘She has found the Earl.’

Her voice had all at once grown hoarse; its hoarseness seemed to affect Bianchi’s. As he half rose from his chair, as if involuntarily, in obedience to some volition other than his own, his huskiness seemed to be a sort of mockery.

‘She has found him?’

‘And she has thrust in him a knife.’

As with an apparent effort of will the man grasped her meaning, his face became transfigured. It was as if

he had been attacked by trismus. The muscles of his jaw and throat became rigid, locked. It was dreadful to see him. His features were set in an awful grin. When his jaw did move, it was convulsively. Words came from him in choking gasps; it was difficult to make out what he said.

‘My God! my God! my God!’

After his triple appeal to the Deity, he was still. The man and the woman, barely a couple of feet apart, stood and eyed each other; she seeing something in his tortured face which cut her to the soul. In some indescribable way she seemed to grow smaller—to wither. As she perceived, less and less dimly, what a wholly helpless instrument Maud had been in the hands of a master of evil, phantoms came crowding into her brain. She began to tremble.

‘Do you mean to say that she didn’t know what she was doing?’

‘She knew nothing; it was Lazarus who did it all.’

They spoke to each other in scarcely audible whispers, as if their voices had become worn to threads.

‘But how could he do it if he was not there?’

‘It was the evil eye. Holy Virgin! Deliver us from evil!’

He crossed himself spasmodically; it was as though some exterior force rebelled against his desire to describe on his breast the holy symbol.

She watched him all the time, ghosts chasing each other through her brain, each conjuring up a separate image of dread. She thought of her recent interview with Maud; how she had showered on her head a whole arsenal of insult. She had accused her of being guilty of all the crimes in the calendar—steeped to the neck in a slough of iniquity. In the light of what the Italian had said, she perceived with what superlative good temper the girl had endured the shower of calumny, how hideously she had been ill-used. Madeleine went hot and cold, red and white, as she contemplated the part which she herself had taken in that ill-usage.

If only the ground would have opened to swallow her

up! If only she could have fled somewhere to hide herself for ever from the sight of men—and women! If only she could have performed some impossible feat of expiation—wiped out with a wet rag the last four-and-twenty hours from the tale of her life!

The pair continued to stare at each other, motionless, as if they had been turned into stone. By degrees a mastering emotion began to grow up in Madeleine's breast; it gathered force—became a frenzied desire to cleanse her soul at any cost from the reeking mass of deception amid which, as it seemed to her, it wallowed; to lift her head out of the depths into which she had allowed herself to sink; to become once more worthy of, at least, her own respect—if she only could do that she felt that God might be once more with her. But until then, never.

She stretched out her hand a little way towards her companion tentatively, as if still in doubt as to what she ought to do or say, and she began to speak in a voice which, at first tremulous, uncertain, gained strength as she went on, until at last her tones rang through the room like trumpet notes.

'It's all my doing—all mine. How great a fire a little spark has kindled! Because I was weak, and suffered my better judgment to be over-ruled, pretending that I was yielding to the promptings of a spirit of adventure, during the flight of only a few hours all this has come. How worse than foolish I have been—what a wicked wanton! Yesterday I could have told myself that, though the world had pressed upon me pretty hardly—and so it has—I had done nothing of which I need have cause to be ashamed. And now, where's all my boasting now! I have plunged, head foremost, into a carnival of shame, smirched myself from top to toe, lost all those things which I held so dear. I have been like a spark dropped into a powder barrel, which, in its explosion, scars everyone in reach. There is not one of you I have not brought with myself to open shame!'

Drawing herself straight up, holding out her arms in front of her, she broke into a strain of passionate intensity.

The Italian—his head held a little forward—stared at her with shining eyes, as if he found in her half-hysterical utterances some esoteric fascination.

‘What is done cannot be undone—the past is past. It has become written in the Book of God, from whose pages nothing shall ever be erased. But I can stop the doing, and I will this instant, if God will only help me! I will confess my sin, if He will only give me strength!—yes, before them all! Take off the borrowed clothing in which I have dared to stand, and show myself to be the creature of rags and tatters which indeed I am. They shall know me as the wretch who has crept into the house like a sneak and thief, with perjuries upon her lips, hypocrisy in the very air she breathes, brazen faced, yet a coward every inch of her.’

In an ecstasy of emotional exaltation, clasping her hands, she seemed to be appealing to an unseen presence.

‘Give me strength, O God, for Thou knowest how much I stand in need of it. Hard is the task which is before me; without Thy help I fear to fail. By the waters of bitterness my feet are faltering, lead Thou them in; for only by passing through the depths shall I reach safety, a quiet conscience, Thy peace upon the further side.’

She was silent, yet continued for some seconds in the same attitude of rapturous supplication. Then her hands dropped to her sides, and with her head held well aloft, turning, without speaking another word, she passed from the room. Bianchi made not the slightest effort to detain her.

But scarcely had she closed the door behind her than without, on the very threshold, she was stayed by a tall, thin gentleman, who held himself to the full as erect as she did, and who glanced at her from under nearly closed eyelids; as he glanced at her he smiled. And from the gentleman, his glance and his smile, she instinctively shrunk back.

It was Mr Lazarus.

The sight of him seemed to fill the girl with an odd

sense of repulsion. She stood as close as possible against the wall, as if to avoid any risk of even her garments coming in contact with his person. She seemed to be waiting for him to move aside, so as to give her room to pass. But, so far from moving, he not only remained stock still, he addressed her, in a voice which grated on her nerves even as his presence did.

‘My beautiful! so it is you. My song-bird, in whose throat the music is all frozen! Ah!’

The ejaculation accompanied a movement of his eyelids which startled her, revealing as it did what a truly astonishing pair of orbs had been concealed behind them. She put up her hand, as if to shield herself from their glare.

‘How dare you speak to me in such a way! Who are you? Let me pass!’

His eyelids had reverted to their original position. He was peering at her from beneath their rims in a fashion which suggested that, for some cause or other, he had been a little taken by surprise.

‘You have forgotten me already? That is strange. It is not often that I am so soon forgotten by my lady friends.’

The last words were uttered with a leer which made the blood boil in Madeleine’s veins.

‘Did you not hear me ask you to let me pass? Stand aside, sir.’

He showed no sign of doing as she desired; but continued to smile and look at her, as if he were examining her with a certain curiosity which was peculiarly his own.

‘You are in a great hurry. Why, all at once? Life in itself is such a rapid thing that it is a mistake for anyone to hurry. Go slow, my dear, go slow. What is the matter with you now?’

The matter was that Madeleine appeared to have resolved to ignore his advice, and to get away from him as quickly as she possibly could. At once his manner changed. Opening his eyes to their widest, he fixed on her a demoniacal glare, extending his hand towards her with a gesture of imperious command.

‘Wait—I tell you to wait!’

The spectacle which he presented was horrible; looking like some obscene creature possessed of unholy powers. The girl shrank back against the wall, seeming for an instant as if she would succumb to his baneful influence. But in that direction, at any rate, she was stronger than he supposed. On a sudden, overtaken, as it seemed, by a paroxysm of uncontrollable rage, she sprang forward, positively leaping at him like some wild creature, striking him, with one hand after the other, on either cheek, well-delivered, resounding blows. In the first flush of his surprise, he started back. Before he could recover himself, she had rushed past him, and darted round the corner out of sight.

His countenance, as he continued to stare in the direction in which she had disappeared, was a study of varying emotions. For an appreciable space of time it was distorted like a maniac’s; no one who had seen him then would have denied that there was madness in his blood. By slow degrees it became, so to speak, smoothed out, until at last it returned to its normal condition of nearly shut eyes and perpetual smile.

‘What is the matter with me? Is it possible that I begin to lose my power? Or have I caught her in an antagonistic mood? I don’t like it; it’s not nice—for me. A short while ago she was so pliable; I had but to look at her, it was done; she was as easy to deal with as anyone could be. Now, already, what a change; to have run away! to have slapped my face! No, it is not nice—for me. When I see her the next time, I will try again; then, perhaps, it will be bad for her.’

As he said this, he unceasingly smiled, and walked towards the music room. Now he had reached it; he turned the handle of the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAUD SINGS TO MR LAZARUS

HE opened the door a few inches, and then stopped. Through the aperture there came the sound of a woman's voice.

Maud was singing.

As the first notes reached his ears another change came over his face. The seemingly fixed smile faded. His brow was puckered. Something in his attitude suggested the animal which has been startled through its sense of hearing. Every nerve seemed strained, lest, through want of vigilance, a sound escaped him. His whole attitude denoted the most complete surprise—a surprise which, as he stood and listened, increased rather than diminished. The song which was being sung within approached its close. As the cadences swelled, denoting a capacity of voice and mastery of method as great as unusual, he seemed to hold his breath, lest even his very respirations should mar the perfect harmony.

The singer ceased. And as she did so he drew a long, deep breath as if of satisfaction. The strained expression passed from his face. The smile returned—more strongly defined.

‘What a voice! What a voice!! What a voice!!!’

The repetition of the phrase and the fashion of its repetition, rising in a crescendo scale, was more expressive than would have been a plethora of words; it signified the Alpha and the Omega of his entire appreciation.

‘Is this Bianchi's nightingale? But how came she in there? She did not go this way. It is not a moment since she went in the opposite direction. She must have some magic beside her voice to have got back

again so soon without my knowing. Let me consider. I think the other door, which leads into the gallery, is up this way.' He pointed with his finger. 'Can she have gone round into the room that way? It is impossible, unless she is a magician. I think I will go through that door myself. If I go through here, she would see me ; she might sing no more, and that would be a pity, a great pity. Perhaps I can get through the other door without her seeing me, and then, maybe, I will prepare for her a small surprise.'

He moved in the direction towards which he had pointed, treading on the ball of his foot as cautiously as if an audible footfall would have brought discovery of his presence ; and as if discovery was, beyond all others, the thing to be avoided. Turning to the left, mounting a short flight of stairs, he reached a second door. This he undid gingerly, just wide enough to enable him to thrust a part of his head inside.

'Ah !—the nightingale again !'

Maud had recommenced to sing. He remained for a second or two perfectly quiescent, with something of the same look of surprise on his face which had marked it before.

'She sings so with her whole soul that she will not hear me if I venture to intrude ; and she has not eyes at the back of her head.'

Softly he insinuated his long, thin frame through the hardly-opened door, so softly that the singer could certainly not have been made conscious of his entrance by the slightest sound. She stood immediately in front of the organ, somewhat to the right, and in advance of where he was, so that he saw her side-face from behind. There was again something distinctly reminiscent of an animal in the manner in which he observed her. He might have been compared to one of the great carnivora watching a possible meal, whose appetite, already keen, was becoming whetted more and more by what it perceived and heard ; and whose instinct warned it to take every precaution against a premature disturbance of its prey.

The girl was singing some florid air of Donizetti's; one which the musical taste of the moment has elected to call old-fashioned. But one forgot the caprice of the critics, or even one's own predilections, as one listened to the singer. One felt that all must be music which issued from that throat; that the commonplace would be glorified, and the meretricious made entrancing.

The single auditor made his own comments.

'Power? There is power enough to fill Hyde Park—and to spare! Quality? It is like an orchestra of violins, all played by masters! Range? Heaven knows how many octaves—I should say all the gamut! Bianchi did not exaggerate. No! He was underneath the truth. What would such a voice be worth—to whoever had it?'

Just then the singer stopped. Glancing carelessly about her, she caught sight of him behind.

'Who are you? What are you doing there?'

He bent himself almost double.

'I beg from you ten thousand pardons for venturing to listen to the choirs of the angels, to the music of the spheres. I did not guess your gift of melody when seeing you just now.'

She glanced at him with knitted brows, as if making an effort at recognition.

'Seeing you just now? What do you mean?'

'When you did me the honour to—' He imitated the action of slapping his cheeks. 'Have you forgotten already—again? It seems to me that you forget very soon.'

The girl was smiling.

'You think so? I think it is you who are making a mistake.'

Something in her intonation caught his ear. He drew himself up, moved hastily towards her, then stopped to stare from beneath his overhanging eyelids with new and singular intensity.

'Did I not have the pleasure of seeing you just now outside?'

'You did not. I have not been out of this room for an hour or more.'

He seemed to be rigid all at once with inexplicable emotion, which she found it amusing to observe.

'I believe it is not! I believe it is not! And yet, great Heaven! Have you a sister?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

'Then—then—have you a double?'

'A double?' Maud bit her lip. 'Why do you talk such nonsense? Pray, who are you that you should ask me such a question?'

He jumped off his feet straight up into the air, snapping his fingers above his head with a noise like discharging popguns.

'It is a miracle! a miracle! I begin to understand—to catch a glimpse! But it is a true miracle! You are Miss Dorrincourt?'

His antics seemed to cause the girl to be divided between entertainment and perplexity.

'I am.'

'And it was you who came to see Bianchi and me?'

She put her hand up to her face. A spasm passed over her.

'I—don't understand.'

'Ah-h-h-h!' He threw up his arms as if to emphasise the long-drawn-out guttural ejaculation. 'This is beautiful; now I see it all! What fools we have been, Bianchi and I. It is your double who has done it. She is like you as two peas. The devil himself will not be able to tell you from each other when he has you both downstairs. She slapped me, your double; well, perhaps in return I will slap you, so we shall be even.'

Maud drew herself a little back.

'You talk in an extraordinary strain, particularly considering that you are a perfect stranger. Be so good as to leave me—at once.'

'All in good time; there is no hurry—move always gently. Perhaps I am not such a perfect stranger as you suppose. Think!'

Thrusting out his finger, as a cat might suddenly protrude its claws, for an instant he opened his eyes to

their fullest limits. Covering her face with her hands, she turned away and shivered.

'Don't! Go!'

Her distress caused him obvious satisfaction.

'Ah! I thought you would remember me if you tried. It would break my heart to think that I was altogether forgotten by one so lovely.'

'Do you hear me tell you to go away?'

'I hear you; but I will not go. I am not such a fool.'

Seating himself, crossing his legs, clasping his hands in front of him, he regarded her, with head thrown back, as a connoisseur might a picture. 'I cannot tell you with what a pleasure I learn that it was not you who slapped me. I was afraid of a great many things. It is a big weight off my mind. Now we will have a little pleasant conversation together, you and I. You love Bianchi?'

The girl continued to shiver, keeping her back still turned to him.

'How dare you ask me such a question?'

'I ask it again. You love Bianchi?'

'I will not answer you!'

'Oh, yes, you will. You will answer me that, and a great deal more. You will deliver yourself into my hands before I have done with you, body, soul and spirit, to do with as I please. So do not be silly in the meantime. You will make me cross. Tell me, you love Bianchi?' She was still. 'So! You choose to begin with a little rebelling. Well! Only you must not let it go too far. Turn round to me.'

She gripped the ledge of the gallery with both her hands.

'I won't!'

'Turn round to me.'

His voice was a little deeper. She bent over the edge, clutching it as if for her life.

'I won't! I won't! I won't!'

'Turn round to me.'

He stretched out the long, claw-like index finger of his right hand, and he opened his eyes. For some

seconds there was silence. His hand remained rigid, his eyes open. Some unseen force seemed passing from him to her, which she was doing her utmost to resist. Her teeth were biting at her lower lip—she was doing it to retain control over the muscles of her face—every nerve was strained to keep her body set and stiff. By degrees, however, her efforts at resistance became less strenuous, as if the continued strain had gone beyond her powers of endurance. The dogged, desperate look which was on her face relaxed; she began to sway to and fro; and at last, loosing her hold on the ledge, tremulously, uncertainly, as if she were giddy, she began to turn right round until she fronted her tormentor. She presented a pitiful enough spectacle as she stood there, with pale cheeks, twitching lips, downcast eyes, trembling like a reed shaken in the wind; but, plainly, it was not the pity of it which appealed to him.

‘Lift up your eyes and look me in the face.’

She hesitated; then, with a sort of start, she did as he bade her. Her lovely eyes met his awful ones. Something passed from his to hers which seemed to cut into her soul, and to dry up the springs of life which were within her. Something in her face seemed to drop; as if the expression had gone right out of it. The result seemed to afford him satisfaction; he allowed his eyelids to drop again, and his smile returned.

‘You see, after all, it is the same; you had better have been sensible at first—instead of giving me all this trouble. Not that it is trouble which I mind—no, not at all. To bring such a lovely creature into subjection is always amusing, and the more she rebels the more it is amusing. So now that we have had this little pleasant struggle together, you and I, tell me—you love Bianchi?’

There was a preceptible pause before she spoke; then the words came with a little jerk,—

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Ah, lucky man! Much-to-be-envied fellow, to be loved by so beautiful a young lady! You love him much?’

Again there was the noticeable interval between the

question and the answer, proving less noticeable as the questions were persisted in.

‘Yes.’

‘With all your heart?’

‘With all my heart!’

‘And all your soul?’

‘And all my soul!’

‘There is nothing you would not do for him?’

‘There is nothing I would not do for him!’

‘You would lay down your life for him?’

‘I would lay down my life for him!’

It was singular to note how, in her parrot-like repetition of his words, she invested her echo with a dignity which gave to the phrases, when they came from her lips, quite a different meaning to that which they bore when they proceeded from his. Despite the wooden mould in which her face seemed to have all at once become framed, she uttered her confessions with an air of sincerity which was not without its pathos, while he wrung them from her with a grin which was a crescendo sneer.

‘So you love him? As much as that? Well, he is a happy man. And he—do you know what he loves? He loves your voice as much as you love him, my faith! perhaps more. And he has sense. It is not only that it is a golden voice—it is a diamond mine, with all the diamonds in full sight. You have only to hold out your hand—it is full of them. Even I could love such a voice as that, you see, even I! Let me have some more of it. Charm my eyes again with the sparkle of the diamonds, and my ears with the tinkle, tinkle, as they fall. There is nothing I love like music, particularly when it comes from such a throat. Already I begin to feel something of Bianchi’s rapture. What would one not dare to have such a voice to do with as one would—even to, marrying the case in which it is contained. Sing to me another song.’

She appeared to hesitate—to make a further puny, futile effort to withstand his malignant influence.

‘I would rather not.’

‘What do I care if you would rather not? I say, sing to me another song. Do you hear me? Sing!’

Once more his eyes gaped; he pointed at her an insistent finger, and straightway she sang. Her arms dangled at her sides, she stood well up, her head a little back, staring unseeingly in front of her; and from her lips there poured forth a flood of song. Possibly, in the midst of her state of complete subordination to this demoniac will, she was conscious of her overwhelming need of help. At any rate, it was as if she cried straight from her heart to God,—

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the gathering waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.

Probably this was not the kind of thing he had expected to hear—this wailing of a soul in agony, this heartrending flight of song beating against the bars of Heaven. However that might have been, it met with his entire approbation. It was a characteristic of this girl's singing that whatever she sang seemed to be just what she had been meant to sing. A more ideal rendering of the popular hymn could not have been conceived. Lifting it out of the rut of the commonplace, she made it worthy of the choirs of the angels. Long before she came to the close, and beyond the slightest doubt, when she reached the lines—

All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring,
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of Thy wing,

had she been singing to a vast assemblage of people, ninety-nine out of every hundred of her auditors would have been dissolved into tears, a fact which her audience of one did not fail to note.

‘That is the sort of song to please the English people, and that is the way to sing it. It is a song of religion, the English religion, and it makes them cry; those are the two things they like—religion and crying! We will pull out both the stops for them together—eh, my dear?’

In France, in Germany, in Italy, they like something a little different—yes, indeed, a good deal different. But for England, where there is the money, that is just the thing. And for America also, there they are as big fools as the English—oh, yes! That song of yours is beautiful! beautiful! beautiful! It would melt a heart of stone; see how it has melted mine. I am all softness. You shall sing it again, and others like it; again and again for me, instead of for Bianchi—why not? Can you not love me instead of him? Is it not easy?’

The girl drew herself together, as if desirous of compressing herself within the smallest possible compass. She shuddered.

‘Love you! You! No! no! no!’

He continued to smile contentedly.

‘You see how the mere thought affects you? That is a sign that you are very near to loving me—so near it makes you shiver. It is the sweet flower of your innocence which closes its petals with a quiver, which is half shame, half rapture. My beautiful! Let me tell you who I am; that will be to make love in the proper orthodox way. My dear young lady, I earn my bread, and sometimes also my cheese, by introducing remarkable people to that great public which loves remarkable people, all the world over, and which pays, through the nose, to see them. Sometimes it is a girl with two heads, or two girls with one head, which is better. Sometimes it is a charming creature, who can kick as high as the moon, first with one leg, then with the other, then with both together. Sometimes it is a lady who can tie herself into fourteen kinds of knots, but she does not last, that lady. She has disappointed me more than once. Sometimes it is a sweet young thing who can turn somersaults, till to watch her makes you dizzy. But this time it will be a new departure. I will introduce a veritable artist indeed! The greatest singer the world has ever seen. It will not be necessary to announce it on the bills; you will advertise the fact yourself, so soon as you open your beautiful mouth. And, so that you may have the benefit of every possible

advantage, I will introduce you as my wife. To begin with, I will marry you. What do you say? Is not the idea enchanting?’

It was not clear that the girl followed all he said with a definite perception of his meaning; but that she understood him at the close her demeanour showed. Her face was ashen white, her whole frame seemed filled with a sense of indescribable repulsion; she could but gasp,—

‘Marry you! Marry you!’

‘Yes, marry me. Is it not a thing of which to dream, eh? My flower! I will introduce you as Madame Lazarus; it is a good name, Lazarus, eh? You will charm the world and fill my pockets. We shall both of us be happy. In the wildest flights of your ambition you never supposed that you would become the wife of such a man as me. It is to go even beyond your dreams—is it not so?’

From her look of agony it seemed as if she were making a violent effort to free herself from the unseen bonds which held her as in a vice, and striving in vain.

‘Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!’

‘Let you go? Never. To speak of such a thing is to be absurd. So far from letting you go, I will keep you with me for ever, till you are dead, or as good as dead, I promise you. Only death, or its full equivalent, shall henceforward part us twain, with such a sudden passion have you inspired my breast. You have your gift, which shall be used for me; and I have my gift, which shall be used for you.’

This last was said with a grin, which drove his meaning home to her with a force which brought on another convulsive fit of shuddering. Rising from his chair, he began to pace backwards and forwards in front of the organ, eyeing her continually, sideways, as a cat might a mouse. Each time he passed her, even though it was at a distance of several feet, she quivered, as with a twinge of pain. Presently, as he continued to stride to and fro, putting the fingers of his right hand up to his mouth, he began to snap his nails against his teeth, making them ring out with a disagreeable click, click, click.

As he did so, the door through which he had entered was opened, furtively, some half a dozen inches, just as he himself had opened it, and somebody else peeped through. It was Signor Bianchi.

Presently, Lazarus broke into audible speech. Bianchi, as if he found himself unable to hear what was being said, opening the door a little wider, came into the gallery. Neither the girl nor the man observed him.

Mr Lazarus was altogether too much engrossed with the fruit of his own cogitations, too full of the pleasure of drawing his toils tighter and tighter round his helpless victim. Every now and then, he threw out his hands towards her ; each time she started, as if he had struck her a blow. His tone became more and more menacing as he went on.

‘ You are a young lady of high birth. Your family is powerful, rich. To take you away, to hide you until I can make you my wife, and perhaps afterwards, that is not easy. It is only I who could do it ; and, even then, think of the danger I shall run. If they were to find you in my possession, would there not be trouble ? To make the risk as little as may be, what I will do is this. You see, I tell you everything. I hide nothing—nothing at all. Why ? Because it is my nature to be frank. Now you are a little under my influence ; soon you will be altogether. I will soak you in the ocean of my will ; I will impregnate you with my own personality ; absorb you in myself. There will be left to you no individuality, no separate existence, no instincts of your own. You will be like an automaton which will only work in response to the movements of a key. And the key—I shall be the key. I shall put my arm through yours, and I shall say, “ Come,” and you will come ; I shall say, “ Go,” and you will go. And if anyone asks you where it is that you are going, you will reply, “ Mind your own business,” or, “ What affair is it of yours ? ” or whatever words I shall put into your head. So we will go out of the house, and out into the world, arm in arm together, indeed a thoroughly united pair.’

‘ You—you devil ! ’

Had the average man found himself addressed in such terms unexpectedly from behind, in a voice husky with emotion, it is probable that he would have spun round like a top, with, at any rate, a view of learning what such an interruption might chance to mean. But it was characteristic of Mr Lazarus, and of his strength of nerve, that for a distinct moment or two he allowed the interposition to go unnoticed. Then, slowly turning, he saw, a few feet away from him, the musician crouching as if he was about to spring, his face alive with passion, every nerve in his body seemingly on the twitter. Mr Lazarus only smiled.

‘Ah! it is you, my excellent friend, Bianchi! Indeed! How goes it, my good fellow?’

Bianchi hesitated, his eyes glaring at Lazarus, then looking yearningly at Maud. Dashing past his quondam friend, he rushed to the girl.

‘Maud! Maud!’ he cried. He took her limp, nerveless hands in his. Emotion impeded his utterance, words treading on each other’s heels. ‘I have done you a wrong—a great wrong. I have been told it all by Miss Madeleine Orme. I beg from you ten thousand pardons. It was not you who promised to marry the Earl of Staines—it was she, now I know. I entreat from you forgiveness; how shall I prove to you that I am sorry? Speak to me, my darling; tell me that you understand that the mistake was natural. Speak to me—I entreat you, speak!’

The girl was silent. His impassioned supplication met with no response. Instead, there came Mr Lazarus’s sardonic tones from behind.

‘Why does she not speak to you? Since you ask her with such warmth? I wonder.’

Bianchi, suffering the gibe to pass unheeded, renewed his hot appeal; as if by dint of sheer vehemence he could force words from between her lips.

‘Speak to me, my sweet, my angel, my loved one! Do not care for him, he is nothing—if you will only try hard you will be able to speak. For my sake, in the name of all that is good and holy, in the name of the

Lord Christ and of His holy angels, I entreat you, my sweet one, my beloved, try, try, try !'

Not a sound proceeded from her lips. A grey look of agony was on her lovely features ; tiny beads of sweat stood on her brow. All that was audible was Mr Lazarus's light-hearted mockery.

'Why does she not try ? It is very cruel of her not to try when you ask her with so much eloquence ! It is so strange ! But you never can tell what it is that moves a woman's tongue.'

Bianchi seemed to hesitate, as if still waiting for her to speak. Then, as she continued silent, turning, with an inarticulate cry of rage, he sprang at Lazarus like some mad thing. The onslaught was made with such violence that the big man, taken unawares, stumbling over a chair, went backwards on to the floor ; the musician, clinging to him as he fell, continuing to unceasingly attack him in a frenzy of unreasoning rage. For a second or two it seemed as if rage would supply Bianchi with strength enough to make the contest equal. But only for a time ; the conditions were too uneven to allow of its enduring long. The very fury which lent the Italian force hastened his own undoing. He became exhausted. Lazarus rose slowly to his feet, holding him, as if he had been a monkey, in his huge hands. With one he compressed the windpipe, increasing the pressure as the writhing little man grew blacker and blacker in the face.

'Shall I choke the life out of you ? Why not ? It would make a proper ending, and to throttle you for me would be good sport.'

The wretched man's eyes were starting from his head ; the horrid spectacle which he presented afforded his friend the liveliest satisfaction.

'The English law is an ass. It does not discriminate ; no ! To kill even such a thing as you it calls murder. It is hardly worth one's while to commit such a crime for the sake of such a subject.' He shook his victim till the wonder was that he did not shake him all to pieces. 'But I think I know another way which is equally

efficient—which will make me as even with you as if I had killed you straight away.’

Picking up some sheets of music—Maud’s music!—squeezing them into a ball, he crammed it into the Italian’s mouth, driving it between his jaws as if it had been a wedge.

‘That will make a pretty gag—a very pretty gag. Now it will be you who will not be able to speak, though you may try ever so hard. The next thing is a piece of string. I always carry a good piece of string, one never knows if one will not want it. You see, at this moment, how useful it is going to be.’

He took from a pocket a long piece of stout twine. This he proceeded to twist about Bianchi’s body, turning him, nonchalantly, up and down and round and round, as if he were some huge doll, until he had drawn it about his limbs in such a dexterous coil that he was no longer even able to struggle. Placing the helpless little man upon the organ stool, and the stool before the key-board, he began to fasten him with the twine to the stops on either side, until he had laced him up so tightly as to be incapable of speech or motion.

‘You will be quite comfortable there, my friend. If the string cuts you a little, you must not mind; it is meant to cut, you understand. If kind people are long before they come to unfasten you, it will cut right through your skin, especially if you fidget. I hope you will fidget, then you will bleed. It is true that you cannot speak or move; but you can see and hear. Now observe; look at the sweet young lady—is she not sweet, eh?—and listen.’

He turned to Maud.

‘You love our good friend, Bianchi?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘You hear, my dear friend? Is not that a good hearing? Do you love him much?’

‘With all my heart!’

‘You see? Once more! Ah, Bianchi, how nice to be you. What would you do for him?’

‘I would lay down my life for him.’

‘Is it not rapture to hear a confession so frank from lips so lovely? Does not the blood dance in your veins? Thrice happy man! Yet the odd fact is, that though she says such things to you, it is me she is going to marry, and soon, without delay, at once, I give you my word! She is going to be my wife, my beautiful wife; ah, how obedient my wife will be! And she will sing for me, like the angels sing; and her songs will fill my pockets with money, which will fall out of the skies. You hear, Bianchi? It pleases you? Well, observe once more.’

Mr Lazarus turned, so that he stood immediately in front of Maud. He held himself straight, seeming suddenly to increase in stature. Throwing his arms above his head, he called out to her in a tone of command which rang through the room,—

‘Look me in the face!’

Raising her eyes, she centred them on his, looked at him fixedly, as some dumb beast, shackled and helpless, might regard the butcher who stands before it with the poleaxe in his hand. Suddenly he swept impetuously forward with glaring eyes, his arms sweeping down towards her as he advanced. She seemed to collapse as his arms descended, until, when he reached her, there was nothing of her left but an inanimate heap upon the floor. Looking at Bianchi over his shoulder, he pointed to the inert mass.

‘You see, I do with her as I will. Yet you must understand that I but begin. Wait till I have her to myself, in my own place, alone—till I am about to make of her my wife.’

He spurned her with the toe of his boot. Stooping, he touched her shoulder with the finger-tips of his right hand, raising his hand slowly, inch by inch. As he raised it she came too, as if his fingers had been magnets, through which a current was being sent strong enough to hold her fast. In this way he restored her to the perpendicular. As a conjuring trick it might have been effective, only one would have preferred to think that the invertebrate figure which had been subjected to

such novel treatment had been that of an automaton. It was not nice to think it was the body of a living woman—and one so young, so gifted, and so beautiful.

‘Give me your arm.’

She passed her arm through his.

‘Come, and be my wife.’

They moved together towards the door, Bianchi following them with bloodshot eyes. When they had gone a yard or two Mr Lazarus paused.

‘Do not let us forget what is proper to the occasion. It is true that Bianchi watches, but he does not count, he is no one. It is right that you should treat me as becomes a loving wife. Kiss me, tenderly, upon the lips.’

She kissed him. Bianchi shut his eyes. Lazarus laughed.

‘Now let us hasten and get married. We are both of us in such a hurry, there is not a moment to be lost.’

Arm in arm, they passed from the room, Lazarus slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER XIX

CONFESSION

THE Earl of Staines sat up in bed, propped at the back by pillows—though he scarcely seemed to need them. His naturally sallow complexion had taken to itself a sicklier hue. His features, always defined with sufficient clearness, now stood out more sharply than ever. His cheeks seemed to have fallen in. His whole face looked wasted and worn, as if he, on a sudden, had grown old. Yet one felt, as one observed the undeniable change which, since his ‘accident,’ had already taken place in his appearance, that it was, probably, owing more to mental causes than to physical. There was that in the lines which marked his forehead, and in the crow’s feet which nestled in the deep hollows about his eyes, which told of mind troubles—stress and strain of unwelcome thoughts which would not be denied.

At his bedside was his grandmother, her chair drawn up so close to him that, sitting as she did, with her head thrown forward, their faces were within a foot of one another. Despite the difference of years, the likeness between them was distinct; in particular, his eyes had that almost fantastic quality of penetrative vision which was characteristic of hers. Near the Dowager was his mother, with whom he seemed to have no feature in common, either mental or physical. She, with her square, impassive, wooden countenance, big, dim, owl-like eyes; he, with the clear-cut physiognomy of a transcendentalist and dreamer, and eyes of mystery, which, especially at that moment, seemed to be looking through time into eternity. In the background hovered Mrs Singleton,

fidgety, anxious, full of trouble, as if continually watching for something which she feared, yet knew must come. About the room were the abundant evidences of feminine occupation ; the thousand and one knick-knacks of the young lady of fashion, the multitudinous adjuncts of the toilet, which are rather playthings than essentials, the reason for whose existence is a source of perpetual mystification to the average man.

The Earl had just been saying something with an air which was intended to mean that that was his final decision—something which the Dowager found not unfamiliar, yet which she half resented. She eyed him in silence after he had finished, as if she was trying to read in his face a meaning which was behind his words.

‘Is that your final decision?’

‘It is.’

‘And you won’t marry her?’

‘I will not.’

‘You’re going to throw her over?’

‘If you like to put it in that way.’

‘And you’re going to break the vow which you have vowed in the presence of a couple of hundred people ; stultify yourself and me, and call down on your head the curse of God which you yourself have challenged?’

‘As to the latter, not at all. That is only to fall on me if I take to myself another wife—which I shall not do. I shall remain unmarried.’

‘And leave everything easy for Reginald?’

He was silent. From the expression of his face one might judge that that consideration had no weight with him whatever.

‘And may I venture to ask why you have come to this decision, which is in direct opposition to that other decision at which you arrived only a few hours since—as I supposed finally?’

‘I do not propose, my dear grandmother, to weary you with details ; but would merely observe that, having reconsidered the position, I perceive that marriage would bring satisfaction to neither of us—so there’s the end.’

‘So she did stab you?’

The old woman's quietly uttered words struck home. It was probable that he had endeavoured to school his countenance to show no trace of whatever storm might rage within. But the quick thrust had taken him un-awares. It had found a weak point. He winced.

'I am not feeling very well.'

'You're not looking very well.'

He was not. His eyes closed, as if they had all at once grown tired; the furrows on his brow deepened; he tightened his lips; he looked like a man who was enduring an acute attack of sudden pain. Even his voice had changed; the cold self-possession with which he had been speaking seemed to have passed away.

'I am afraid I am hardly fit to enter into disputatious matters. I sent for you, somewhat against the doctors' wishes, because I was conscious of having arrived at a determination which I felt it my duty to communicate to you at the earliest possible moment. Now that I have done so, I am afraid that I must beg you to excuse me. I begin to realise that the doctors were more in the right than I supposed.'

'Why did she stab you, Staines?'

Again the lips twitched—the eyes still closed. Then, after a moment, the dark orbs opened—something saturnine seeming to be shining out of their depths.

'Pray, on what grounds have you concluded that she did anything of the kind? Has she told you?'

'Not she. On the contrary, she has sworn, by all her gods, she didn't.'

His eyes reclosed. When he opened them again it was to say, in even, measured tones—as if he was considering the meaning of each word as it passed his lips,—

'Since she has already made to you a statement, it only remains for me to endorse it.'

'You fool! Staines, you're an idiot!' He only smiled. 'You may laugh, but, if you'd a grain of sense, you'd wait for your laughter till you win. I will say this for her, that she lies like truth—with a thousand times better air than you. There's that in the business I don't

understand, though you needn't trouble yourselves to cover it over with lies, because I don't want to understand—I'd as lief not. But you don't suppose that I'm going to have my life purpose put aside because you two have already begun to scratch each other? Don't think it! All these years you've been willing to marry her—do you imagine that at the eleventh hour I'll suffer you to kick? I've too good a grip of the reins, my lad, and the whip's too close to my hand. As for Maud Dorrincourt, she's boggled at the business, I'll allow; but now she's been screwed up to the sticking point, or she's screwed herself—she's said she will marry you, and she shall.'

'She has never said so—never!'

Madeleine was the speaker. She stood at the foot of the bed, appearing there all in an instant, as it seemed, out of space, they knew not whence, nor how. She was still all glowing with the haste of her flight from Lazarus, hot from her interview with Bianchi, tingling with shame at the thought of the injustice with which she had treated Maud. Her whole being was agitated by varying emotions, which, raising her out of herself, caused her to be unconscious of all else but her eager desire to free her soul from the burden which weighed it down. Never had her beauty appeared to more advantage. Her cheeks glowed, her eyes flashed, every movement of her limbs or body was an added grace. While, amazed, taken by surprise, they looked at her askance, she went on, in a voice clear as a bell.

'You are under an entire misapprehension, completely and entirely mistaken in supposing that Miss Dorrincourt ever contemplated, even for an instant, the possibility of giving such a promise; she has done nothing of the kind. On the contrary, she has never wavered in her determination not to marry the Earl, or in her resolution not to hold out the faintest hope of her ever being able to do so. She has been afraid that you would put unfair pressure upon her, of a kind which she might find it hard to submit to, but though you used her never so cruelly, I am persuaded that she would rather die than yield.

My lord, rest assured that Maud Dorrincourt has never promised to marry you, and that she never will.'

She flung out her arms as she uttered these final words, as if they had been some sort of missile which she was hurling at his head.

The Earl, oblivious of the pillows which were supposed to act as a prop to his back, was leaning forward, staring at her across the length of the bed. The Dowager, genuinely surprised for once in her life, had screwed her ancient head round between her hunched-up shoulders, and glared at her with astonished eyes.

'Is the girl stark mad? Or does she imagine we are?'

'I have been stark mad; but at last I have returned to my sober senses; that is all.'

The Earl interposed.

'But—surely I misunderstand you—surely you promised you—you would marry me.'

'I promised you. Yes, my lord. To my shame be it said.'

'To your shame? Why to your shame? You—you pretended that you loved me.'

'It was not pretence, my lord—no, it was not that. Again to my shame be it spoken. Who am I that I should make you such a promise? I, a worthless, deceitful creature, without rank and fortune, scarcely, in the world's judgment, a fit mate for one of your serving-men.'

Mrs Singleton came bustling forward, all tremulous anxiety, touching her timorously on the arm.

'My dear, think before you speak! Don't be over hasty! Do be careful what you say!'

Madeleine turned towards her austerely, like an offended queen—Mrs Singleton shrinking before the reproach which her bearing conveyed.

'I will not be over hasty, I thank you, Mrs Singleton, and I will be careful, for the first time since I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. These are matters on which you yourself had better take advice. Had you not been over hasty, but much more careful, things would not have been done, the shame of which nothing

which you can do during the brief remainder of your life will erase.'

She gave the old woman a glance before which that worthy cowered, as if she had been made conscious, as by a flash of lightning, of the unseemly part which she had played. Madeleine, turning from her, walked along the side of the bed towards the Earl.

'Look at me, my lord.'

Something in her demeanour seemed to tickle the gentleman she addressed, though his mood was certainly not disposed to humour.

'I am looking.'

'Look at me closely.'

'I am afraid, if I am to look at you closer, you will have to lean towards me. I cannot come nearer to you, being forbidden by the faculty.'

'Is it possible you cannot see I am a stranger?'

'A stranger? Maud! You are star-gazing. In your judgment, is the woman whom a man has known and loved from his childhood still to him a stranger?'

'My lord, it is not I whom you have loved.'

'But I know better. I know that it is not only you whom I have loved, but that I love you more than ever I did; that, while formerly my affection was of the platonic sort, of late, on a sudden, it has burst into a white hot flame, so that, at the sight of you, I burn with a desire to take you in my arms and fold you to my breast.'

'My lord! My lord!'

Trembling, she covered her face with her hands.

'My darling, do not cry nor let yourself be troubled. For all that has happened the fault is mine. In the first flush of my new and strange love, I had forgotten that you need not have changed because I had. Something in your words and manner, and—and even in your looks, my dear, I was so foolish as to misconstrue. And that was how the mischief has been done. But now that I perceive the crassness of my stupidity, do not think so badly of me as to suppose that I will allow an iota of my fault to rest on you; that would be to judge me even more harshly than I deserve.'

‘My lord! my lord! It is not I whom you have loved!’

Removing her hands from before her face, holding them out in front of her, the girl looked at him with streaming eyes. He met her glances unwaveringly—with, in his own eyes, something of that ecstasy of pain which is akin to rapture.

‘That may be so, since you assert it; and, after all, it is of little consequence; for certainly you are she whom I love now.’

She started back; her cheeks all red.

‘You are mistaken.’

‘It is hardly a point on which a man is likely to be mistaken. It would be better, perhaps, for both of us, if it were otherwise; then my every pulse would not be throbbing with the anguish of my desire to hold you in my arms.’

‘Is it possible that one face and form can be so like another that, even with the eyes of which you speak, you cannot tell the two apart?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is it possible that, even now, you cannot see that I am not Maud Dorrincourt?’

‘Not—Maud Dorrincourt?’

‘Can you not see that I am not?’

The Earl half rose in bed. His face was agitated by varying emotions. First, bewilderment, surprise; then, something which transfigured it so utterly, that, all in an instant, the look of pain, and stress, and worry was lifted clean off it, as if it had been a mask, and, at once, he seemed and was twice the man that he had been before. He sank back to his former position with a long, gasping breath—as if dismissing from his breast all the humours which oppressed him.

‘What a triple-plated idiot I am! Of course you are not Maud—that’s the puzzle which all the time’s perplexed me. What a purblind bat I’ve been! Come closer—let me look at you.’

‘Can you not see me where I am?’

‘Come closer!’ She went a little closer. ‘Closer still!’ She obeyed. ‘Give me your hands.’

'My lord!'

'Give me your hands!'

She did as he bade her, yielding her hands affrightedly—as if she dare not disobey. He held them in both of his—reading her face as if he loved to feast on it.

'No—you are not Maud; you are the woman whom I love.'

'My lord!'

Her voice was so low that it was not easy to catch her words.

'You are the woman who loves me!'

This time she was silent; her head sank down. Drawing her to him, he put his arms about her.

'No!—thank God!—you are not Maud!'

He kissed her on the lips, and she was still.

Lady Hildegarde, striding round the bed, gripped the girl by the shoulder.

'Staines, let her go; I wish to speak to her.'

Her peculiarly strident tones suggested that her mental equilibrium was not in any way disturbed. The Earl scarcely glanced at his mother, he spoke to the girl.

'It is I who have a right to call you to account, and I alone; I am not altogether the weak being I have seemed to you. Do not be afraid.'

He loosed her. She stood up.

'I am not afraid.'

She did not look as if she were. She met the oddly-built great lady's stony glare as if, at any rate in that, she saw nothing to fear.

'So you are an impostor. Reginald was right; his eyes are keener than mine.'

'Yes; his eyes are keener than yours.'

'Who are you?'

'I am Madeleine Orme.'

'Madeleine?' The Earl held out his hand to her.

'That is a better name than Maud.'

'Come with me, my girl. It is time that you and I should understand each other.'

Lady Hildegarde gripped her left arm, but the Earl, tightening his hold of her other hand, held her fast.

‘You are right, mother; it is time that you should understand each other; but, if you have no objection, you will understand each other in my presence. I would rather.’

‘My dear Staines, don’t be a greater idiot than you have been already.’

‘I trust, my dear mother, that in all things I shall always be your son.’

‘Let her go! Why are you holding her hand?’

‘Because, God willing—and the lady—I hope to keep hold of it for ever.’

‘You must be stark mad! Don’t you understand that the creature’s a barefaced impostor? that she’s been guilty of playing a part which would be possible to none but the very lowest type of woman? For all you know, she may be the very scum of the earth; and probably she is.’

‘My dear mother, you know not of what you speak.’

‘And you—you rave! How much further will you let her go with you? Will you wait till she has killed you quite? Already she has laid you there.’

‘That is not so.’

The speaker this time was Madeleine. Lady Hildergarde looked at her—woodenly, then addressed her son,—

‘You hear? The statement, added to all the rest, ought to show you the kind of character she is; you know it is a lie.’

Madeleine went on before the Earl could speak,—

‘My lord, it is no lie. Something, unfortunately for me, the greater part of what your mother says is true; but in attributing to me this particular crime, she errs. I have been weak, and, therefore, wicked—because I am beginning to believe that weakness and wickedness go hand in hand; it is certain that, in my case, it has been so. I belong to a different caste from yours, I am an inhabitant of another world; I have worked hard to earn my daily bread since I was a little child. To you it may sound strange, almost like a fairy tale, but it is a simple fact that, as your world understands the term, you are

the first gentleman I have ever spoken to, and this is the first time I have ever pretended to equality in the presence of a lady. I am a daughter of the people, lowly born and lowly bred, and never have I known what it was to be the possessor of a superfluous penny. These things are true. But though a barefaced impostor, as your mother puts it plainly, and maybe one of the scum of the earth, I have not joined to my other offences attempted murder. I did not stab you. No, my lord, there your mother errs ; it was not I.'

The Earl kept his eyes fixed upon the girl's face while she had been speaking ; now he turned to Lady Hildegarde.

'May I ask you, my dear mother, to leave me for a little while with—Madeleine. It is she and I who must understand each other, and that without any further loss of time—alone, together.'

Her ladyship objected.

'I shall do nothing of the sort. The girl would twist you round her finger. She's brazen-faced enough—seeing the kind of man you are—to try to persuade you into making her your wife.'

'I wish she would try. I'd like to have to bear the brunt of such persuasion.'

The Earl smiled ; but the girl was crimson. She tried to withdraw her fingers from his detaining grasp, and failed, perhaps because she did not assert herself with sufficient resolution. The Lady Hildegarde was calm, but scornful.

'Stuff ! Staines, you are a fool. You'd let the hussy cheat you into discrediting the evidence of your own senses. Come, my girl, let me see how you'll back up the lie you've told. If it was not you who used that knife with such effect, who was it, then ?'

'Maud Dorrincourt.'

The answer occasioned general surprise. The Dowager showed least. Since Madeleine's declaration of her identity she had remained twisted half round on her chair, watching her with an attention which never wavered, and a stolidity which betrayed nothing of what was passing

through her mind. Now, that she was surprised she showed by a quick movement of her ancient head; but that was all. Lady Hildegarde was, outwardly, but little more demonstrative. Loosing her grip of Madeleine's arm, she clenched her fists, seeming, for a second, as if she were about to repel the girl's assertion with actual violence; but there she stopped. It was the Earl and Mrs Singleton who made an effort to conceal the surprise they felt. The man's sallow cheek grew paler; the trace of colour which had been in them fled. His jaw became square and set; his whole expression hard and rigid. His eyes gleamed. He looked like one on whose nerves there had been a sudden strain—which had strung them to their utmost tension.

Mrs Singleton, on the other hand, was all in a flutter of rage; so much so, indeed, as to become inarticulate with passion. Rushing at Madeleine, she shook her fists at her in speechless fury. Presently, however, she recovered sufficient self-control to enable her to burst into a torrent of execrations.

'You wicked girl! You shameless creature! You lying wretch!—to dare to utter such a falsehood! I wonder you are not afraid that God would strike you dead! That you should venture to try to pass the burden of your own wicked sin on to Miss Maud, when you know that the poor darling is far, far away from here—dead, buried, for all that anyone can tell—'

'She is not dead—or buried.'

'How do you know?'

'Because, not many minutes ago, I was speaking to her.'

'You were speaking to her! You!'

'Yes, I. She has been hiding from you all the time, beneath this roof.'

'Hiding from me—from me!'

'From all of you. You have driven her to it, between you. You have treated her, not as if she were a creature of flesh and blood, into whose veins God has breathed life, to use it as her own, but as if she were a thing of clay, which you might fashion into what shape you chose. You have refused to admit that she has a right to order

her own existence just as much as you have a right to order yours ; and that since she, and she alone, is responsible to her Maker for what she does with it, you are not entitled to twist it this way and that, and to trammel it with conditions which her very soul abhors. And so she has hidden herself away from you, since only in concealment she can obtain even a taste of that liberty for which her whole being aches and longs.'

'But how do you know all this? Where's she hidden?'

'Her hiding-place is not very far from where you stand ; and from her own lips I know it. I had only been in the house a little while when she came to me, and made of me her confidant, imploring me, so long as I was able, to continue to take her place, and to allow her to remain at peace. Had she not done so, I should not have stayed—being almost as conscious as Lady Hildegarde that my position, into which, as Mrs Singleton is aware, I had been drawn against my will, was hardly one which a woman of the higher type would care to fill. But when she entreated me, I yielded ; wherein I was weak, and, maybe, wicked ; and for my weakness and wickedness I have suffered, and am like to suffer more.'

There was silence. All eyes were fixed upon her. Each seemed conscious of appearing at a disadvantage ; of a feeling as if—though it ought to have been the other way about—she was the judge and they the judged.

The Dowager gave voice to what was, possibly, the common sentiment ; never once throughout the scene had her hawk-like eyes strayed from the study of the girl's rapt countenance.

'At least, young woman, you do not want the courage of your convictions. Did ever before a baggage carry off what is something more than a piece of brazen impudence with such an air?'

'My courage is not often lacking, though it sometimes is.'

'Was it what you call lacking when you stood up before all that crowd of people, pretending to be my

grandchild, allowing me to use you as if you were, and promised yourself as wife to the Earl of Staines ?'

'I was not afraid, and, since you ask me, I'm not sure I'd not like to go through it all again to-morrow.'

'Upon my honour ! And promise yourself to another earl, I take it, ma'am.'

'No, to the same one, if it please your ladyship.'

'You're over scrupulous, it's out of character. Surely you're of the sort of woman to whom a man's a man, and so long as 'tis a man, 'tis all you want.'

'Your ladyship is pleased to jest.'

'And you — are you pleased to be in earnest ? Do you propose to hold him to the troth which he has plighted, and threaten breach of promise if he should chance to fall away ?'

'Your ladyship understands me very ill if you suppose it. I know as well as you that I am not fitted for his wife ; and promise not only that I will never let him marry me, but that when I go away from here, which will be in a minute now, he shall not see my face again.'

The Earl struck in,—

'Be careful what you say, Miss Orme. Make no rash promises. I shall have a word to say on that.'

'You will have no word to say, my lord ; and, when you give it your consideration, you will see on this point, at any rate, that I am right.'

'My lordship will see nothing of the kind, so let's have no more misunderstanding there !'

On the Earl's face there was a smile which suggested that, in this matter, he was prepared to join issue ; and which seemed to irritate his mother. The Lady Hildegard favoured Madeleine with some further excerpts from her stock of plain English.

'Well, my girl, you've treated us to some tall talk, and to some sounding speeches, and played your part of impudent impostor right out to the end, forgetting all the time that I have but to send for the police to have you lodged in gaol, to lie there, perhaps until you rot and die, for the crime of attempted murder.'

'As I have told you already, you are under a misappre-

hension. If you were to send for the police, as you threaten, it would not be me whom they would lodge in gaol.'

'Not you? You past mistress of all insolence! Who, then?'

'I am afraid, Lady Hildegarde, that they would have to arrest Maud Dorrincourt.'

As she spoke, the door opened, to admit Reginald Fanshawe and his friend, Mr Champnell.

CHAPTER XX

THE RELEASE OF SIGNOR BIANCHI

‘I HOPE, with Mr Pry, that we don’t intrude; but it almost seems, from the few words which reached my ears, as if our entry were quite opportune. Is it possible that I heard my fair cousin say that she was to be arrested?’

Reginald’s gentle, soft, carefully modulated tones, seeming to express so much more than was conveyed by the literal meaning of his words, affected his hearers not altogether agreeably. Madeleine turned towards him with, in her bearing, a possibly unconscious touch of hauteur; she held her head a little back, and had the air of looking down on him from above.

‘I said that I was afraid that, if anyone were to be arrested, it would be Maud Dorrincourt.’

‘Is that so? And you said you were afraid? How truly unfortunate! And what will be the excuse those pernicious policemen will offer for such an outrage?’

‘According to your mother, it will be for the crime of attempted murder.’

‘Attempted murder? Indeed. Only attempted? And for such a triviality you stand in danger of such indignity?’

‘I did not say I did; I said Maud Dorrincourt.’

He looked puzzled, and was, as his question showed.

‘I beg your pardon? It is my stupidity, but—I am afraid I don’t quite follow you.’

‘I am not Maud Dorrincourt.’

His mask-like visage, over whose mutations he kept such careful watch and ward, underwent an entire altera-

tion. His graceful smile, which he seemed to wear as a sort of ornament, passed from his face, as if it had slipped and fallen. His beautiful eyes became, all in an instant, ugly. His jaw shut tight, like a rat-trap. The lines deepened about his eyes and lips, each individual one seeming to suggest a separate snarl. Evil temper so debased his whole apperance that one realised his wisdom in endeavouring, in an ordinary way, to prevent the revelation of the kind of man he really was by concealing his countenance behind the visor of even an artificial smile. He hurried forward, his stature dwarfed by passion—there are men it exalts; it made him smaller. The smoothness had gone from his voice; he screeched,—

‘So! You’re holed! And you think to scramble out by an eleventh-hour confession! But it isn’t good enough, my dear—that cock won’t fight!’ He turned to the others with a burst of malignant spleen. ‘I spotted her from the first—she didn’t take me in. She’s here, and knows it. I knew she wasn’t Maud; I smelt the street girl!’

‘Reginald!’

The interruption came from the Earl in the bed; and conveyed, or should have conveyed, a warning.

‘Well, she is a street girl—Singleton picked her off it. She’d been kicked into the street for misbehaviour. I’ve just had it from the lips of the man who kicked her.’

‘Have you? Then, perhaps, you’ll be so good as to bring him here. I’ll have it from his lips as well.’

The tone was ominous; the Earl’s look was ominous too. Reginald screamed back at him,—

‘Don’t be an infernal fool! I tell you, man, the girl is nothing but a wretched beggar, who keeps herself alive God alone knows how, and whose most decent habitation, from the moment she was born, has been an attic. Champnell and I have found out all about it. Singleton saw how like Maud she was; he brought her to Mrs Singleton, between them they hatched a precious plot, and foisted her off on to you as Maud, for which pretty piece of business, if I have my way, the pair of them will

go to gaol. It is this penniless adventuress—to use, as you'll yourself admit, the mildest possible word—who has been playing off on you these charming tricks; making you believe that Maud had changed her mind; pretending to love you; actually publicly promising to be your wife—the future Countess of Staines, my faith—winding up, as an appropriate climax, by sticking a knife between your ribs.'

'That's a lie!'

'Bah!' Mr Fanshawe turned his back on Madeleine, from whom the denial came, with a gesture of superlative contempt. 'On such lips as yours lies and truth are one. Mother, why don't you ring the bell and have her flung into the gutter? Particularly if, as I suppose, consideration for the family honour, which she has smirched more than enough already, will enable her to escape the public prosecution which she so justly merits.'

It was his brother who replied to him.

'The reason why such an order as you suggest is not given is—hardly that which you suppose. It happens, moreover, that Miss Orme has already acquainted us with the principal facts with which you in your turn have favoured us, and which you have coloured with an eloquence which is peculiarly your own.'

'Acquainted you? Is that how you put it? Why, my dear fellow, she knew the game was up—that Champnell and I were on her track; she thought she'd get in front of us, that's all!'

'I scarcely think that, with Miss Orme, that was the sole determining cause. However, I am obliged to you for your kind offices. Might I ask you to take no further interest in my affairs, any more, for instance, than I take in yours?'

'Your affairs? Is she your affair?' He pointed to Madeleine. 'I beg your pardon. I did not know it.'

'Reginald!'

Again there was that note of meaning in the intonation of the Christian name. The queerly-matched pair of brothers eyed each other disagreeably. Then the

elder addressed himself to Madeleine—to her his tone was one of even fastidious deference.

‘I must apologise, Miss Orme, for these frequent interruptions. Might I ask you to tell me precisely where Miss Dorrincourt at present may be found? And of what offence I have been guilty that she should seek to deal out so severe a punishment?’

‘You have been guilty of no offence. It is not what you have done; she did not know what she was doing to you.’

‘How is that?’ The Earl smiled. ‘The matter becomes more and more mysterious.’

The girl did not smile; her bearing betrayed no disposition to levity of any kind; it was alive with that intense earnestness which had marked it from the first. She stretched out her hand with an eager gesture; the hand which the Earl had, for so long, retained in his own.

‘It is mysterious. I don’t understand it quite myself. But from what Signor Bianchi told me—’

‘Bianchi? I thought Bianchi would come in.’

This was Reginald. Madeleine just glanced at him, and then went on.

‘From what Signor Bianchi told me, it appears that Miss Dorrincourt was present in the music room when—when—’

Madeleine stumbled; Reginald filled in the hiatus.

‘You did the head of the family the distinguished honour to promise to become his future Countess? Auspicious moment!’

Madeleine went on hurridly, her cheeks glowing with an extra shade of colour.

‘After, she went to speak to Signor Bianchi, and—and’—she became conscious that again she had reached a point at which explanation might be difficult; again she stumbled—slurring over the proper sequence of events—‘a friend of his was present, whose name, I think, was Lazarus. This Mr Lazarus cast on her what the Signor calls the “evil eye;” at any rate, he got her entirely under his influence. While she was in that condition he made

her go and look for you, and stab you, she being all the time unconscious of what she was doing, just as much so as if she had been walking in her sleep.'

She spoke a little breathlessly, as if anxious to tell her story with all possible speed. Her words were followed by silence, the silence of astonishment, and also, it seemed, of incomprehension and incredulity. Reginald turned to Mr Champnell with a movement of his shoulders which was intended to be significant of his entire disbelief.

'You perceive, Champnell, that the days of the romancers are not all gone; no wonder that so many novelists come to the front from among women—like Miss Orme.'

The Earl ignored his brother.

'What are we to understand, Miss Orme, by the "evil eye"?''

'That you must ask Signor Bianchi; I only quote to you his words. But I do know that Miss Dorrincourt did not know what she was doing, and that she does not know even now what it is that she has done.'

'This Mr Lazarus must be an amazing rascal. What injury have I done him that he should be guilty of such an abominable act?'

Madeleine was still. She was conscious that, at that moment, it might be inadvisable to point out that the whole mischief had had its origin in the Italian's jealousy. The Earl went on.

'And where do you suppose that will-o'-the-wisp of a girl is now? Have you any notion?'

'When I last saw her she was in the music room, about to practice some songs. She may be singing still.'

'Mrs Singleton, ring the bell. I'll have inquiries made.'

Madeleine interposed.

'If you'll excuse me, I think you may defeat your own purpose if you do. With your permission, I will go and see if she is there; and if she is, I'll bring her to you—that is, if she will come.'

Reginald spoke.

'With your very kind permission, might I suggest that Mr Champnell and I should act as your escort? It may require more than one to find this very elusive young lady, according to your own accounts, Miss Orme.'

Madeleine received his offer with but a scant show of gratitude.

'It is a matter of total indifference to me what you do, or where you go. I am unable to prevent your acting as what you call an escort.' She addressed the Earl. 'I think, my lord, that if I am to find Miss Dorrincourt in the music room, the sooner I go the better.'

'You will not be long?'

'I will use what haste I can.'

'And you will return?'

She hesitated.

'My lord—'

'If you will not promise to return, and that without the least delay, you shall not go—that's flat.'

She appeared to consider.

'My lord, I will return; in the hope that Miss Dorrincourt will condescend to confirm, in my presence, the truth of so much of what I have said as comes within her knowledge.'

The curiously assorted party went forth upon its errand. Madeleine in front; Mr Fanshawe, whose passion had become a sneer, behind; Mr Champnell, whose shrewd, bright eyes nothing escaped, and by whose tongue nothing was betrayed, was at his shoulder; while Mrs Singleton furtively, doubtfully, brought up the rear. Her face, her bearing, her tremulous movements, spoke of her anxiety to set eyes once more upon the girl for whose sake she had dared and done so much, yet who had placed in her so little of her confidence.

When they reached the music room, instead of that glorious voice bursting on their ears as Madeleine had half expected, there was not a sound. All within the

great room was still. From where they stood, just within the doorway, nothing and no one was in sight. The place seemed empty. Mr Fanshawe commented on the fact—with a sneer.

‘The bird has flown—if she was ever here. You are quite sure you saw her here?’

‘I am quite sure.’

‘It is some, a considerable satisfaction to know that you are certain; but, since it seems plain that she has gone, where would you suppose, Miss Orme, that she has vanished to?’

Madeleine’s quick eye had caught sight of something lying on the floor at the further end of the room, just beneath the gallery. She went quickly to it, the others still clinging to her heels. It was a sheet of music, a song, which lay there, crumpled up, as if it had come fluttering down from the gallery above. On the outside page was written, in big, sprawling letters, ‘Maud Dorrincourt.’

‘Unless I am mistaken, Miss Dorrincourt is not far off. Perhaps we have disturbed her. If she had been gone any time she would hardly have left her music lying on the floor. I fancy she thinks too much of it.’

‘Perhaps she’s hiding in the gallery.’ The suggestion was Reginald’s. ‘Ladies have been known to hide, and even double, when closely pressed. She’s only to stoop low behind the gallery’s front, and, so far as anyone down here’s concerned, she’s hidden. Let’s go up and see; perhaps we shall catch her in the very act of stealing away.’

They went out from underneath the overhanging roof, all glancing upwards.

‘Why,’ cried Reginald, ‘there’s some more of her music on the ledge there; if she has gone, she’s gone in a hurry. What’s the betting that she isn’t behind this panel now?’ Putting his hand up to his mouth he gave a view-halloo. ‘Yoicks! tally-ho-o! Come out of it, fair cousin mine, we’ve fairly run you down! Now, Miss Orme, who will be the first to find?’

He ran up the staircase. But Madeleine was at his side. Together they reached the top. For a moment it seemed as if their speed had been for nothing, as Mr Fanshawe proclaimed,—

‘Holloa! She gone away! It is to be a chase! If I had bet I should have been the loser. Why—’

He stopped short, staring. Madeleine, looking where he looked, took up the parable where he had dropped it.

‘It’s Signor Bianchi! Something has happened—something serious. I felt that something was wrong directly I saw the piece of music on the floor. Poor Maud!’

It was the Signor, trussed precisely as Mr Lazarus had left him. Fastened hand and foot to his beloved organ; with the sheet of music still crammed down his throat. It was well they came upon him when they did—he was as nearly dead as might be. His friend had done his work with malevolent thoroughness. The wad of paper thrust between the musician’s jaws was large enough to distend them to their extreme capacity. His efforts to get rid of it sufficiently to enable him to cry for help had made bad worse; a little more and it would be choking him; as it was, his eyeballs were starting from their sockets, and his face was growing black. He was perched on the high stool in such a manner that when he struggled it threatened to topple away from underneath him—in which event he would have in all probability been hanged, for the cord was twisted round his throat, and fastened to a stop so tightly that the sudden jerk which would have followed the falling of the stool would almost certainly have dispatched him from this world into the next. His hands and arms were tied close to his sides, the cord being strained with such merciless severity that one could see the great weals of discoloured flesh standing up on either side of it, where it cut into his flesh. The miserable Italian presented a spectacle as pitiable as it was unusual; and one at which the quartette of new-comers stared with looks of undisguised amazement.

Mr Champnell was the first to recover his wits. Taking

out his pocket-knife, he proceeded, with all possible rapidity, to cut the cords which bound him ; drawing, at the same time, the gag from between his teeth, which latter task was not as easy as it might appear, so tense and rigid were his jaws, and with such savage cruelty had the wedge been driven in. The result was what might have been foreseen. No sooner were the bonds relaxed than Bianchi groaned and swooned, only recovering from the swoon to be constricted by an agony of pain. The blood, struggling again to circulate, seemed to penetrate his veins like molten lead ; he writhed and twisted in his anguish.

When he had somewhat recovered, it was to find himself confronted by four inquiring and bewildered faces. Mr Champnell's voice, firm and clear, yet not unkindly, was the first to fall upon his ears.

'Come, you are better now ; very soon you'll be all right. How comes it that you are in this extraordinary fix?'

Bianchi's lips moved, but no comprehensible words proceeded from them. As yet his swoollen tongue refused its proper office. It was still some moments before they were able to distinguish what it was he was trying to say. Then they understood that the word to which he endeavoured to give utterance was a man's name.

'Lazarus ! Lazarus ! Lazarus !'

He mumbled it, hoarsely, yet more and more distinctly, over and over again.

'Yes, Lazarus ; I hear. What has Lazarus done to you ? And who is Lazarus ?'

Madeleine touched Mr Champnell on the arm.

'I know. Ask him where Miss Dorrincourt has gone.'

Mr Champnell obeyed.

'Where's Miss Dorrincourt, do you know ?'

It was plain he did know something. At the mention of the lady's name he showed more signs of returning consciousness than he had done hitherto, raising himself out of Mr Champnell's arms and sitting up upon the floor.

THE RELEASE OF SIGNOR BIANCHI

'Miss Dorrincourt!—Maud? He has taken Lazarus! May the saints in heaven bless!

He clenched his fists; his bones rattled uneasily in their sockets; his

'He has taken her? What has he taken her?'

Bianchi struggled to his feet, painfully; tottering when he gained a footing. He was possessed by some uncontrollable agitation, which drove from him the memory of the pains he had endured, and from which, it seemed, he was suffering still. His whole frame quivered and shook with excitement, which was momentarily growing greater and greater. His Southern nature asserted itself in gesticulations. He stretched out his arms, threw back his head, rolled his eyes, seemed to strain every muscle, in his endeavour to give full expression to his strength of feeling. His words came faster and faster.

'He has cast on her the evil eye. Heaven, that such things should be! He has taken her!—away!—right away! Where, I do not know! With him!—alone! She is in his hands like a doll, a dummy, a nothing! My beautiful! Dream of my eyes! Star of my soul! He is going to marry her—yes! He is going to make of her his wife—his wife! My God! The devil! the thousand, thousand, thousand times devil!'

He had worked himself up, all at once, into a state of frenzy, presenting an odd picture of insensate rage.

'He is going to marry her? Miss Dorrincourt? Of whom are you speaking? Explain yourself.'

'It is easy—as plain as print. It is her voice he is after—her voice! He cares nothing for her youth, her beauty—no, nothing at all! It is only her voice he wants. In it he sees heaps of money, heaps and heaps—and there, my God, he is right; there is a gold mine in her voice!—a gold mine! He says to himself, if I marry her, if I make her my wife, she will be mine, and her voice too; there will be a gold mine in my pocket. The hundred thousand times devil!'

He wound up with a flood of imprecations—in an idiom of his own. Mr Champnell endeavoured to arrive

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

...er comprehension of what it was he

...calm yourself a little, we shall be
...better, and time will be saved.
...you wish us to believe that Miss
...away with this man Lazarus of
her own free will, intending to become his wife?'

'Of her own free will! My God, no! He has cast on
her the evil eye!'

'Mr Bianchi.'

Madeleine, coming forward anxiously, even timidly,
touched him on the coat sleeve. Swinging round upon
his heels, when he saw her he flung out to her his hands,
with a cry of ecstasy which was not without its pathos.

'Maud! It is you! You are back again! You are
free from him; you have shaken off his chains! My
beloved one! Light of my eyes! Queen of my heart!
I rejoice with all my might, and all my main. I would
rather die a hundred deaths than know you were in the
hands of that scoundrel Lazarus, and at the mercy of
his devil's will. God has been more good to me than I
believed, since, after all, he has suffered you to escape
from him, and to stand before me, once more your own
beautiful self, so that I may feast upon you with my
love-sick eyes!'

Madeleine shrunk back, all pale and trembling.

'I am not Maud; don't you remember? I am she
who, to my own great misfortune, God has seen fit to
make so like her; I am Madeleine Orme.'

Bianchi did remember; with a sense of shock. He,
too, drew back. His manner changed.

'Oh, yes—I remember. Oh, yes—you are Madeleine
Orme. You are the cause of all the trouble; you are
she who has brought on us all the plagues of Heaven;
who has plunged us into the waters of bitterness, so that
we may drink them to the dregs, and suffer more than
those who die. Well, I hope you are content. Your
double, whom you have so cleverly pretended to be, is
at an end; she is done for for good and all. She is in the
hands of Lazarus. When he gets in his hands a thing,

especially if that thing is a woman, by the time it gets out of them again, there is very little left of it; nothing that is worth anything. Of that you may be sure.'

Madeleine's trembling increased. The little man's passionate, if curiously-chosen words, seemed to make her quiver as if they had been the thongs of a whip.

'Mr Bianchi, do you mean that he has her under his influence again; that he can make her do as he chooses, as he did before?'

'That is what I mean, that's just it. What he calls his accursed power I do not know; it is an attribute of Satan—a thing of evil. He holds out his hands, she obeys the wagging of his finger; he drops his hand, she falls in a heap on the floor; he raises it, she gets up again. She puts her arm through his; she goes off to marry him—to become his wife. May the saints in Paradise entreat the good God to take pity! Better for her that she should marry a real devil out of the true hell!'

'But, Mr Bianchi, where has he taken her? Where have they gone?'

'I do not know, I know no more than you. Beyond that she has gone to be his wife, I know nothing.'

'But he is a friend of yours?'

'He is not a friend—never! He is an acquaintance only. It is true that he has been known to me for several years, but as no more than an acquaintance. We are not enough in sympathy—he is always mocking.'

'But where is his home? Where does he live?'

'He has no home—he lives nowhere. To-day he is in London, to-morrow in Paris, the day after in Vienna. You find him in Milan, St Petersburg, New York, South America—wherever he is at the moment, that is his home; it is all the same to him.'

'But you know his address in town?'

'Not I. I see him this morning for the first time for two, three years. Where he has been in the meantime I know no more than the dead. He say nothing. I ask no questions.'

'But you must know some more of his acquaintances, and they may know.'

Bianchi reflected.

'I know a place where he is sometimes to be heard of, but that is all. It is a restaurant; there they may know what is his address, but it is by no means sure.'

'Let's go there and make inquiries; there's not a moment to be lost. He may be stopping at that very place, and Maud may be with him. I dare not think of what she must be suffering each second she is in his hands.'

'She does not suffer—she knows nothing. She will not know until it is too late, even if she knows then. Lazarus is too clever; he will not wish to have trouble.'

Mr Reginald Fanshawe interposed.

'It seems to me, Miss Orme, if Mr Bianchi will excuse me, that the real meaning of this apparently mysterious business is that Miss Dorrincourt, in one of her freakish moods, has chosen to go off with this peculiarly-named gentleman for reasons of her own. I know Miss Dorrincourt a trifle better than you do, and I do assure you that, at any and every cost, she will always be original.'

Madeleine was furious.

'It is quite in keeping with your character that you should talk like that, but, in this case, you don't know what you are talking about. If you had ever seen the man Lazarus, you would know better; he is the most horrible-looking creature I ever beheld.'

Reginald raised his eyebrows.

'Ah, if he is so very hideous, of course that counts.'

'Counts! I should think it did count. I am sure that no woman would ever willingly be left alone with him for two consecutive seconds. And as for marrying him,' she finished the sentence with a shudder. 'I am convinced that Mr Bianchi is right; I am going this instant to the restaurant of which he speaks, to find out, if I can, where the creature lives.'

She hastened towards the door at the side, through which Mr Lazarus and his victim had passed together arm in arm. Her eye caught sight of something lying on the floor. She snatched it up. It was the address side of an envelope which had been torn.

'Why,' she exclaimed, 'what's this?' She read what was written on the sheet of paper. "'Mr Lazarus, Wellington Mansions, Chelsea;" the number is torn, but the rest is plain enough. Why, I do believe that it's the man's address.'

Signor Bianchi struck his forehead with his fist.

'What a fool I am; what a fool! I remember now that he told me that he had taken a room in the Wellington Mansions! What was the number? I forget the number, but it does not matter! I will find him without the number, and I will have his life, or he shall have mine. I swear it by all the saints in Heaven!'

The excitable Italian rushed through the door, followed by Madeleine, with Mr Champnell close after. Mrs Singleton went forth crying like some frightened child. Mr Fanshawe remained by himself, twisting the ends of his moustache with his fingers, smiling to himself. Then, after a second or two, he went leisurely after the others.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CAT AND THE MOUSE

THE apartment was not remarkable for elaborate upholstery. A strip of felt carpet—red lozenges on a white ground—was on the floor, a bed was in a corner, and in another corner was a 'combination' article of furniture, which served as washhand stand, toilet table and chest of drawers. A large, curious-looking wooden box was before the fireplace, a small table in the centre, which articles, together with two cane-seated chairs, one with the back off, practically completed the chamber's garniture.

The French window opened, as one perceived through the uncurtained panes, on to a small balcony. Before it stood Mr Lazarus, the most prominent object the room contained. He was lighting a wooden pipe, using in the operation, as it seemed, an unnecessary number of matches. Each one, as he lighted it, he held for the briefest moment in close proximity to the bowl, and then threw it, still flaming, at Maud Dorrincourt, who was seated in the centre of the room—sometimes hitting, sometimes missing. Whatever the result might chance to be, it seemed to afford him equal amusement; with each match he threw his grin grew broader.

Certainly the girl did present a curious spectacle, the effect of which was heightened when one reflected that this was the daughter of a hundred earls, who had been bred in the very lap of luxury, whose beauty was famous, of whose glorious future such wondrous visions had been dreamed. Her hair was disarranged, loose coils dangling about her neck and ears. This confusion of her lovely locks, which was not of that alluring kind of which poets

prattle, added to the incongruity of her attire. She was still clad in that gorgeous gown in which she had appeared with such signal effect to her cousin of Staines ; but, in some way, like her tresses, it had become disordered too, and was warped, creased, twisted, so that it seemed not only shabby, but tawdry, and positively became her ill. Sparkling gems were on her fingers, gleaming bracelets on her wrists ; but they also only added to her bedizened appearance. She was sitting on the backless chair, limply, like some lay figure, and was as lifeless as one. Mr Lazarus flung at her his flaming matches, but she seemed to be indifferent whether they did or did not strike her ; continuing motionless even when the burning missiles were flung against her face.

He could hardly have had a better cock-shy ; it was this inanimation which seemed to afford him so much amusement.

Presently, tiring of his sport, or concluding that he had wasted sufficient matches, puffing at his pipe, which was now well lighted, he strolled close up to her. He pulled her hair close to the skin, twisted her ears, filleted his fingers against her nose, pinched her neck and arms, she evincing not the slightest consciousness of either the pain or the indignity to which he was subjecting her.

Impassiveness carried to such lengths moved him to speech—to critical comment.

‘This is the very oddest thing of all the odd things I’ve known—the queerest. All my life I have been looking for a man or woman—a woman preferred—into whom I can project my own personality so completely that he or she shall become the reflection of myself, the creature of my will, the slave of my desire. And after all these years, just when I was not looking, I have stumbled upon a woman. And such a woman. My stars ! so lovely ! and so young, of so high a family, with so great a fortune at her back. I am afraid that not much of that fortune will be for me ; there will not be a great dowry given with my wife. But that doesn’t matter ; we will try to do without it, the pair of turtle-doves we are. I think that in her I shall find a fortune of another kind.

Sing through the scale three times, as loudly as you can.'

These latter words he addressed to Maud, with a peculiar directness of intonation. The moment they were spoken she sat up, held her head straight, opened her lips, and went thrice up and down the scale with a force, a clearness, a spontaneous burst of melody, which was marvellous; then, like some clockwork figure, her lips reclosed, her head sank forward, she became all limp again. The effect was almost supernatural. It impressed Mr Lazarus not a little.

'Wonderful! Extraordinary! Very queer indeed! It is not only the voice, which is the greatest the world has ever known—when he said that, Bianchi was inside the mark—it is the obedience. If I was to exhibit her as a subject only, I should make my fortune; I am sure of it. I have been the greatest mesmerist that ever lived—upon the placards; and I have done some wonderful things with my subjects, but then I have had to pay them every night in advance, and even then, at times, they have refused to do all that was set down in the bond, with my money in their pockets. Oh, yes, I have had my troubles with my subjects more than once—even to free fights. But this is real—this is genuine—this is the actual thing! Investigation challenged—exposure defied! The mesmerised lady—the only genuine article that has ever been exhibited! What jokes I could have with her if I were to show her, at so much a head, at some of the places of which I know. My stars! I believe she would draw as much money in that way as with her voice in another. Stand up!'

The girl stood up with automatic suddenness.

'Jump over the chair!'

She jumped over the chair with surprising ease and lightness.

'Dance the Highland fling!'

She danced it with indescribable grace and deftness; picking up her skirts at times just high enough to show her dainty feet, flashing hither and thither beneath her silken drapery. It was as charming an exhibition of its

kind as one would care to see; a spectator would have found it difficult to credit that she did it all unconsciously. Mr Lazarus was himself constrained to wonder.

‘It is a marvel—nothing else. I wonder what it is, in her or in me, that does it? As a rule, it is the weak person who is influenced—the hysterical, the underfed, the neurotic. But she—she is not weak; no, she looks to me as if she had the constitution of an ox, as if she did not know what nerves meant. Yet there must be in her somewhere a—what shall I call it?—a muscle, a nerve, a something, which dominates her altogether, on which the whole of her consciousness is built, so that, when an outsider gets control of it, there is an end for her of a separate existence, of an individual being, of a personal responsibility, for ever and for ever. It is very curious indeed—most queer. It is fortunate that it is I who have got control of that little unknown something, fortunate for me and for her—yes, and for her.’

His grin was eloquent. He pulled steadily at his pipe, expelling clouds of smoke through his nostrils.

‘But come! why should I have all the conversation to myself? Since I am favoured with the presence of so charming a young lady, why should I not have a little talk with her—a little exchange of ideas—a little communion of soul? We will see!’

Placing himself on the other chair, with the unbroken back, stretching out his legs, he placed his huge feet, in their coarse, street-stained boots, on the girl’s lap, she paying no more attention to them than if they had been nothing at all. He eyed her, from under his nearly closed lids, as a collector might regard a newly-acquired specimen of an unusual kind.

‘Come, do not look so glum; do not keep your beautiful lips so tightly closed. I will be kind to you—you may speak. I am not a man that wishes always to be too severe. There must be discipline, especially must there be discipline where a woman is concerned. But, at those times when discipline may be relaxed, I allow a little latitude—oh, yes, believe it of me! Talk

to me, open to me your heart, let me peep into your soul. Like all young girls, you have your notions; tell me what you have proposed to do with yourself, with your life, with your voice. Speak—I listen.'

There came over her the same change which had come before. She sat up straight, posing her head a little back upon her shoulders. A slight shadow seemed to flit across the vacuous countenance, as if she were making some kind of an effort to collect her thoughts. Then, opening her lips, she began to speak in a sweet, tremulous monotone, straight on, like a child who recites a lesson. Not once did she pause or hesitate, but continued to pour out to this strange auditor the most secret thoughts of her heart; speaking to him, without disguise, of matters which, under ordinary circumstances, she would rather have torn out her tongue than have hinted to a creature of his sort. Now she dwelt on them with a candour and simplicity which is characteristic of the child which prattles at its mother's knee.

'My voice? I have always thought that I would like to use my voice for the glory of God and for the happiness of men. I have dreamt that I was in Heaven, and God came and touched my throat, and said, "I have given you that which I never gave to anyone before. Use it for Me to increase the sum of the world's happiness." I have dreamed this so often that I have almost begun to believe that it really happened. It has come to me both when I have been asleep and awake. Sometimes when I have been wide awake, in the middle of the day, something has suddenly seemed to come over me, and I have been in that place in Heaven which I knew so well, and God has come to me, and it has all happened over again. I do think that God has spoken to me in His own fashion, and I dare not disobey. Indeed, I wouldn't if I dare. For what could be sweeter, and grander, and better, than to sing for the glory of God? And so, when I am alone, I sing my very best, feeling that it is to Him, and that He will know it is to Him. And sometimes, when I have been in better voice than usual, and have sung my very, very

best, in the silence which has followed I have felt that a Presence was with me in the room—a Presence which has said to me, “Well done!” How can the applause of crowds compare to the applause of God? or what triumph can be greater than to be approved of Him?’

The girl’s face was uplifted. A certain radiance seemed to be shining through the mask which the man in front of her had riveted on her features.

She went on in the same easy, gentle murmur, as if the words rose to her lips as spontaneously as the bubbles rise to the surface of a glass of sparkling water.

‘As for the second part of His behest, that I should use my voice to increase the sum of the world’s happiness—I have often asked myself how best it could be done. I have asked guidance of Him, and I think that, perhaps, it has been given me. I shall have enough to live upon, I shall not have to sing for money. It is true that if I refuse to marry Staines, grandmamma will not leave me her fortune; but I have something of my own put by, and have little doubt that, in one way or another, I shall not be in actual want. So what I propose to do is this. I shall visit all the countries of the world, and I shall sing in all their great cities, to all who choose to come and hear me, free. I shall sing to them always, so long as my voice endures, for the glory of God.’

‘And that will make the people happy?’

The inquiry came from Mr Lazarus.

‘Yes, I hope that that will make the people happy!’

In her voice there was, perhaps, a faint suggestion of a dormant doubt.

‘And where do you propose to sing—in the open air?’

‘In the great halls of the great cities.’

‘My experience, of which I have had a trifle, is to the effect that people value a free show at what it costs them. But that is by the way. Who is to pay for the great halls in the great cities? And, I suppose, there will be something for advertisement. Will you have a collection at the doors, and will you have it taken up as they go in, or as they come out?’

‘No, I do not think there will be a collection.’

‘Who, then, is to find the money? Do you propose to sing for nothing, and to pay for the halls as well? That is a pretty scheme.’

‘I do not know. I am sure that God will point out the way.’

‘You have a nice notion!—a nice notion of how to make of yourself an utter fool! I have never listened to anything so nonsensical—and, in my time, I have listened to some rubbish. Now that I have heard you, I begin to understand how it is that you are sitting there. A woman who nurses such an idea in her mind must have something wrong somewhere with her works. Since, therefore, you are sure, sooner or later, to fall into the hands of an adventurer, it is just as well that, at the very beginning, you have fallen into mine. How about Bianchi? I thought you were to marry him?’

‘I am not certain. It depends on several things.’

‘But I thought you loved him?’

‘Yes, I love him.’

‘Well?’

‘In marriage, love is not the only consideration in the eyes of God.’

‘Do you think he would let you sing to the people free?’

‘I am not sure.’

‘I am sure, dead sure. He has some sense.’

‘He is a musician. It is for music that he lives.’

‘Yes, for music, and for dollars.’ Withdrawing his feet from the lady’s lap, Mr Lazarus rose from his chair in something like a pet. ‘You are an idiot, an entire idiot. You are mentally deficient. In you, somewhere, is the seed of imbecility, which will germinate and take root, and grow, until you become all mad.’

On his face, as he spoke, and in the way in which he looked at her, there was more than a suggestion of the strain of madness which was in his own blood. He went on, in quite a rage.

‘To think of singing to the people free, you fool! Why, if you sang to them free, they would not come to

listen to you. Why do people not value the wild flowers which grow by the wayside? Because they are to be had for nothing. If you were to offer a man who has money in his pocket a bunch of wild flowers, and a bunch of flowers from the conservatory, though the wild flowers were the prettier, which would he choose? The flowers from the conservatory, because for them he would have to pay. The wild flowers he would get for nothing, and, therefore, he would esteem them common. That which a man can get for nothing, he has plenty of, and of what he has plenty he tires. It is for that of which he does not have plenty, and can never get plenty, never! never! that he always craves. So with your singing. Sing to the people in the street, they will pass on, they will not even stop to listen. But sing in the Albert Hall, and charge a guinea for a seat, they will come from all parts of England to hear you; you mark my words and see!' He pointed at her a protrusive finger. 'One thing I advise you, not to think that a scintilla of that dream of yours will ever come true. I assure you, by the living jingo!—whoever that may be—that you will never sing to anyone anywhere unless I see my way to make something out of it—never! I am not such a fool! Do you know—be attentive, I am going to ask you a question—do you know what is to be your future life?'

'No.'

The answer came with an automatic clearness which he seemed to find amusing.

'You are going to be my wife. Would you like to be my wife?'

'No.'

This time, neither the answer nor the fashion of it seemed to afford him quite so much pleasure.

'What's that? You would not like to be my wife? You had better change your mind, double quick. Say, I would like nothing better than to be your wife.'

'I would like nothing better than to be your wife.'

The responsive words were uttered with a prompt

simplicity which would have been more effective had it not been quite so wooden.

‘Say, I love you, Aaron Lazarus, with all my heart and soul, and with all my mind and body.’

The echo came in the same dull, mechanical fashion as before. But he appeared to find it satisfactory.

‘That is well. Since you love me, show it in a proper manner. In all things be obedient; do not spare yourself in anything; make of yourself a willing slave, as becomes a wife. Then, when I am in a good temper—I am not always—I will, sometimes, not be too severe with you, when I think of it. But, understand, I make to you no promise; from you I shall expect everything; from me you have to expect nothing; and you will get it. You will be like the dutiful dog to whom, sometimes, is thrown a crumb from the table, when those who sit at meat have fed. With me it is in this way. I am in a devil of a fix. I have had a little accident with a young girl. She was a bender, a contortionist, and—she died. She was not worth very much to me, but she was all the income that I had. They are not well paid, contortionists, unless they do something which will make the people who look at them shiver with horror. Then they are paid like princes. I tried to make her do something which would make them shiver; and—there was an accident. It is very queer how easily some people die. It was a long way off; but there was a great fuss, so I came away. All I brought with me is in that box.’

He pointed to the huge wooden box which stood before the fireplace.

‘I did not stop to bring more, lest I might have been able to bring nothing. So, for the present, I am not rich. I even fear that we shall have to support existence by means of those pretty baubles which you have upon your wrists and fingers. Take off your rings and bracelets and give them to me, my dear child. They shall be a wedding present to the bridegroom from the bride.’

She did as he bade her, handing the ornaments to

him one by one. Her mother's wedding ring, however, refused to budge.

'Never mind about that, we are not yet reduced to such a point; when we are, we will cut it off, it will be easy.'

He scrutinised keenly the articles which she had, with so small a show of remonstrance, entrusted to his keeping, going close to the window, so that he might have the full advantage of the light.

'They are good stuff, these things of yours; they must have cost a little fortune, and I will get good money for them, you will see if I do not. We shall be in clover, you and I. I shall be able to afford myself many little luxuries which I was afraid that I should miss. To begin with, we will be married according to the rites of the Christian Church, at the office of a registrar. Then we will go for our honeymoon to a little spot I know among the mountains in Hungary; there we will be quiet for a time, and we will be happy as the day is long—oh, yes, so happy. Then, after a little while, I will take you to a great musician of my acquaintance, whose word, in the musical world, is money; and you will sing to him a little song—for nothing; that time it will be free. And after that, I think, the shekels will begin to come. You see how swift my brain moves; it is all settled in the twinkling of an eye—your life for ever and ever. Now, in order that we may be married, it is necessary that the registrar should have forty-eight hours' notice; so the first thing to do is to give him notice, for we are in a hurry, and every moment is like a year until we are made one. But what am I to do with you while I go to give the notice? I will try a little experiment. Stand up!'

She stood up straight on the instant.

'You understand all that I have been saying?'

'Yes.'

The word was dully spoken—the very dulness seeming to suggest an intensity of pain.

'I am going to see how much of your consciousness I can take out of you, how much of your life I can absorb in mine. Look me in the face.'

She looked him in the face, and he looked at her. His eyelids opened with that sudden movement which was a trick of his. The nightmare orbs behind them were fastened on her poor, strained eyes. There was an interval, which continued perhaps a minute. Then his hands, his arms, his whole frame began, as it were, to vibrate, as if he were subjecting every nerve to a tremendous strain; a vibration which her body copied with a horrible fidelity. As he went closer to her, her whole form, from the head down, began to incline slowly backwards, he bending over her, and seeming to prevent a too rapid descent by dint of some magnetic quality which emanated from his shaking body — holding her with some sort of positive attraction, so as to keep her from falling faster than he chose. At last she lay on the floor quite flat—he glancing down at her, gloating with maniacal fervour on the havoc he had wrought. Her entire frame seemed to have shrivelled—to have grown smaller. Her ordinarily lovely skin had assumed a parchment texture. All trace of colour had gone from it. Her cheeks had fallen in. There was about her whole appearance a corpse-like quality which anybody but Mr Lazarus would have found repellent. To him, however, it seemed to afford lively satisfaction.

‘It is wonderful—most curious. How strange are the mysteries of Nature, on which one stumbles unawares! I feel as if I had sucked some of the life out of her veins into mine. I believe I could draw it all out of her if I were to try. I am sure that I could draw so much out of her that no one could put back any life into her but me. It is a power which, one day, I may find useful. In the meantime, do not let me forget that this is but a little experiment which I make. Now, to put back into her at least some of the life which I have drawn out.’

The process of resuscitation was not a rapid one—nor would anyone but an individual of peculiar tastes have found it pleasant. He had to bend right over her, glowering with his ogre-like eyes, recommencing that strange vibration of his body, as if he was again subjecting his nervous system to an unnatural tension. Presently

her body began to quiver in sympathy, as it seemed, with his. She began to rise with him inch by inch—as if he drew her after him, until, once more, she stood up straight upon her feet. Then, for some moments, he continued to project his hands and arms towards her rapidly, on this side and that, until she sighed, and then he stopped.

It was time. One had only to look at him to perceive how great was the strain which he had been enduring. His head and neck were moist with perspiration. He panted as for breath, and trembled as with weakness. He sank down on to his chair with a gasp; lolling, with his head back, like some tired animal, staring at her through his once more narrowed eye-slits.

‘If it is a labour of love it is a hard one; it is not the sort of thing I would care to do a dozen times a day. I feel as weak as a rat. All the life has gone out of me again—back, I suppose, into her. It is strange enough, but the process, if mysterious, if often repeated, would become exhausting; that I can plainly see. Sit down.’

She sat down—again on the backless chair. She returned to the limpness of a lay figure. He regarded her critically.

‘You are not looking so very pretty now, my dear. If I were to go through this performance frequently, all your beauty would soon be gone; I believe it would. Well, we will not do it more often than can be helped, for prettiness in a woman is an asset of some value to the man who owns her.’

He pulled himself together with something of an effort. He rose from his chair.

‘Well, I go to give notice to the registrar of our union of hearts—of our marriage, my dear child. The first thing is to have you married for the sake of your good name, and for my sake too. You will be quite safe there till I come back, I think you will. I will not be long. When I return, we will make love to each other, true love, in a way of our own.’

He put on a queerly-shaped silk hat, which was unusually high in the crown and wide in the brim.

Buttoning his coat up almost to his chin, he left the room, pausing without to lock the door and pocket the key. Then, taking out the rings and bracelets which he had obtained from Maud, he submitted them to a further examination, one by one. Selecting a particular ring, he placed it in an ancient leather purse. The remaining articles he deposited in the pistol-pocket of his trousers.

He went downstairs, six flights of them, which showed that the apartment which he had just quitted was situated at a considerable elevation above the ground. He paused at the door which led into the street, and which, apparently, was always kept wide open, to peer about him. As he did so he caught a glimpse of a face which was looking through the window of a four-wheeled cab which had just been driven by. He instantly drew back into the shadow of the wall.

‘Bianchi!’ he muttered. ‘My stars—Bianchi!’

CHAPTER XXII

THE CAT IN A CORNER

THE mere utterance of the name 'Bianchi' seemed to have on Mr Lazarus quite a singular effect, as if someone had struck him a severe and unexpected blow, which had disturbed both his mental and physical equilibrium. Compressing himself within the smallest possible compass, hugging the wall as closely as he could, he looked about him furtively, as if he were afraid. Then, turning—relinquishing, apparently, his intention of quitting the building—he hastened up the stairs again, going up much faster than he had come down, taking three or four steps in a stride with a display of agility which, to say the least, was striking. About half way up he paused, and, leaning over the banisters, looked down into the depths below, with a look upon his face of panic terror. He waited for some seconds, listening, watching, not even seeming to breathe; then continued to ascend, even quicker than before.

Such was his agitation that, when he reached the door of his own apartment, he could not recall in which pocket he had put the key. He fumbled first in one and then the other in vain, cursing the while beneath his breath.

'Curse the key! Where did I put it? I cannot think where I put it.' He bit his finger-nails, his thoughts travelling to another theme. 'It was Bianchi—yes, not a doubt, and—the other girl—who slapped my face; and there were others. What are they doing here? Was it an accident? Or—have they—? Curse the key!'

Even as he cursed he found it. With a shaking hand

he put it in the lock; the door was open; he passed within. On the very threshold a thought occurred to him which occasioned him, apparently, no slight discomfort.

'I remember! I remember! My stars! What a—what—idiot I am!' There came a volley of oaths. 'I told Bianchi the address myself—I gave it him with my own lips! I said to him, "Lend me ten pounds." He said he had not the money just at hand, but he would send it. I said, "Send it to me at Wellington Mansions, where I have taken an apartment." My stars! To think I should have forgotten—that I should have brought her here—that I should have put myself in such a trap!'

He hurriedly closed the door, locking it inside, re-pocketing the key. Each instant his agitation increased as the thoughts came hammering at his brain. He clutched the loose skin of his long, skinny throat with his cruel hand, twisting it this way and that as if it had been indiarubber.

'It is all over with me, after all these years, I feel—I know it; and it is to my own incredible stupidity that I owe the finishing. The game is up, my course is run, my last bolt is sped, just at the moment when I thought I had made the greatest coup of my life! My stars!'

He looked round the room; his glance falling on the unconscious girl, who still sat perched, like a limp lay figure, on her backless chair. As he realised her presence, a change came over his countenance, which was almost too horrible to contemplate. In that instant he crossed the border line which divides the insane from the sane. The wild beast which was at the back of him came to the front. The man was mad. He grinned a mad man's grin.

'It is for you—it is for you I am in this hole. It is all your fault—all yours. You dear little child! You jade! Well, they will get me, but that is all they will get; they will not get much of you, that I promise them. I will be even with them before they—' He chuckled himself, with a significant gesture, under his chin. 'What shall I do to you? Let me consider. What shall I do

to you, that shall destroy you altogether, and hurt them most? Shall I—shall I—?’

A demoniac glare came on to his face—the lust of a satyr. After a moment or two, however, the expression faded, giving place to one which was not very much more pleasant.

‘No, there is not time; I might be interrupted. Besides, I can do better. I will take it from you, not only your innocence, I will take your all. You hussy!’ He struck her smartly on either cheek. ‘Why do you not rise when I come into the room, you insolent animal? Stand up!’ She stood up instantly, the marks on her cheeks showing where his fingers had been. He noticed them. ‘What is that upon your face? How dare you have that redness on your face because I have the condescension just to touch you? How dare you?’ He struck her again, three or four times in succession. ‘You see, that is what you get for having a redness on your face, and that is only the beginning. Attention! Look straight into my eyes—for the last time in your life!’

As the man’s great yearning, flaming eyes met hers, seeming to threaten to draw them from their sockets by sheer force of repulsive attraction, his continually increasing agitation at once affected her—in a moment she was all of a twitch. He regarded her as some hungry brute might the helpless victim which it proposes to presently devour—she hanging on his glances in a spasm of expectant agony. The muscles of his face began to work, he opened his mouth, raising his lips so that the yellow teeth were seen beneath, each instant his appearance became more ogre-like, when a convulsive shiver passed over him; he withdrew his eyes from her face, twisted his head round on his neck, and listened.

‘What’s that? Who is that upon the stairs? Have they come already? My stars! I must be quick, or they will beat me at all points.’

Back went his face towards hers. Again he fixed on her his awful glare. Presently there recommenced that strange, vibrative movement of his entire frame, as if it

were the natural and inevitable response to the enormous strain which he was plainly putting on all his nervous forces. He gibbered to himself in a kind of frenzy.

‘Quick! Quick! Come out of her, life, come out of her! Quick! quick! quick!’

It seemed as if, in answer to his conjurations, life did come out of her, actually and literally, so to speak, grain by grain, drop by drop. He seemed, by the exercise of some force, which was either prehensile or suctional, to be extracting the essence from her vital tissues—that essence which gave them being. So that while each second she appeared to shrink and shrivel and grow less, he increased and swelled, dominating her with a violence, both muscular and mental, which became more and more disproportionate to her own.

It was strange to see her swaying as he swayed, her very finger-tips keeping time with his in a sort of rhythmic echo. The motion of every muscle in his body she imitated with marvellous fidelity; only there was this difference, that, while his movements became more strenuous, hers became perceptibly weaker, and still more weak, until the only thing of which she seemed capable was a continuous tremor. It was then that he appeared to put forth his utmost strength; to project his personality most completely into hers; to draw from her the last remnants of her vital force. It was then, too, that there commenced in her that backward, downward movement, which was so slow that the wonder grew as to what were the means which held her suspended in mid air. He bent over her, forward, as she went back, so that, as the distance between them—at most, three or four inches—remained the same, it seemed plain that it was from him the suspensive force must issue; but what was its nature, nothing went to show.

He finished, as he had done in the course of what he had been pleased to call his ‘little experiment,’ by laying her on the floor, stiff and stark like a corpse, he stooping and gloating over her like some triumphant demon. A casual intruder would have declared she was a corpse—she had all the outward semblance. He placed his hand

upon her bosom, his ear against her lips, his fingers on her pulse; the result was as he desired.

‘There is not a trace of respiration, not a trace. I have drawn the life all out of her into me. I feel it in my veins; oh yes, I feel it. It is good to have her life as well as mine; it makes me feel young again, and strong. It would be well always to have a young girl, pretty, in good health, from whom to draw a fresh stock of life.’ He turned her over with his foot, as if she were a log. ‘She is as good as dead, and better. No one will be able to put life back into her but me. And I—I shall not choose. No, I shall not choose; I think not, except on my own terms, which will be high. Even should someone else be able to put life back in her, it will not be her own life—that I have; it will be someone else’s life. What will she be like with someone else’s life in her young veins? Bah! My stars! What a jest it would be if they were to move Heaven and earth to bring her back to life, only to find her transformed into a sickly, rotten creature, without a voice. How very funny it would be if, at the very least, she were to lose her voice. How she would be happy with her dreams of God in that place in Heaven which she knows so well. But no one but me will be able to put back life into her; no! no one but me! not at all! try how they may! Of that I am sure. What shall I do with her? It would be inartistic to leave her here to hit them in the face directly they come into the room. There would be lacking the dramatic elements of a search, and the subsequent discovery.’

Looking round the room, his glance reached the fireplace.

‘The box!’

He went to the big wooden box—lifting the lid.

‘No, it will not do. It is large, but it is hardly large enough; and then it is so full. Besides, it is commonplace; everybody hides the body in a box. About the affair so far there has been that air of the uncommon which lends distinction. It would be a pity to detract from the effect.’

Handling carelessly the contents of the chest, he came on something which seemed to give him a notion—it was a cold chisel. A nice instrument of that ingenious manufacture which takes to pieces, packing up, when unscrewed, into so convenient a compass that one may carry, at a pinch, the whole of it in one's coat pocket. The separate lengths were contained in a canvas bag; taking them out, he fastened them together.

'The idea is not so original as I would have desired, but beggars cannot be choosers; time presses, and it must serve.'

Something seemed to catch his ear. He glanced quickly towards the door, again with that look of panic terror.

'On the stairs? No! Not yet! They are longer than I expected. I wonder why? Every respite is a little gained.'

The chisel, when all the parts were joined, proved to be a serviceable tool some two feet long, or more; it resembled, in fact, one of those useful implements which have played, and still do play, so large a part in housebreaking, and which, to gentlemen of the burglarious profession, are known as crowbars. Holding it in his hand, he searched with his eyes the floor; and, finally, dragging aside the wooden box, he began to prise up one of the boards on which he had been standing. Forcing the point of his tool into an interstice, he used it as a lever. In a surprisingly short space of time, so deft was his manipulation, the board was up. He repeated the process with a second adjoining board, and again with a third. Then, rolling the girl over and over, with an evident appreciation of her unconsciousness of the indignity to which she was being subjected, he brought her to where a chasm now yawned in the floor.

'In you go!'

And in she went, between the joists, amidst the rubble and the rubbish, on to the rafters of the room below. The fit was a tight one. There was hardly room enough between two joists to admit the human female form divine with its clothes on, but he managed. He

crammed in portions with his hands, and trampled in others with his feet; and somehow made a job of it. Then he replaced the boards, not being over particular about hammering in the nails; and over all he drew the wooden box back into its original position.

Then he rubbed his hands together softly, with the gratified feeling of a man who has done well.

'They will have to find her now—oh yes, they will have to find her. This is more artistic altogether. Now she will not hit them in the eye as they come in. And perhaps they will not find her—at least for some time, by which time she may be—altogether dead. Who knows? Who cares? What a voice was there! What a voice! Well, sometimes the world loses prematurely its greatest treasures—and never knows what it has lost. Who knows? Who cares?'

He moved to the window, stepping gingerly—as if he were afraid of being overheard. Turning the handle, he drew open the door—still with the same odd regard to quietude. He waited for a second or two, as if to discover if anyone had been disturbed. As the silence remained unbroken, he stole, like some prowling beast of prey, through the open window on to the balcony beyond—crouching low, as if anxious that as little of him should be seen as possible. There ascended to him the noises of the street. On the roof, not far above him, some sparrows twittered. A bugle was blown, apparently in the barracks close at hand. He seemed to take in all these things, and to be searching among them for one distinctive sound, which he failed to find.

Then, cautiously, he stole closer to the balcony's edge; the balcony was but a shallow one, probably less than three feet wide—so that he had not far to go. In front was a railing, not over high. It was attached to the balcony by iron rods. Through these he peeped. But they were not wide enough apart to enable him to thrust his head between—so that he could not see what was directly underneath. He hesitated; then, with the same queer carefulness, raised his head till he was able to see over the rail beneath.

A four-wheeled cab was at the door. Some people were getting out of it hurriedly, as if pressed for time. He waited for an instant, just long enough to enable him to catch a glimpse of what was going on below—to see the people from the cab come hastily into the house. Then he returned into the room—swiftly, stealthily, savagely. He took up his position against the wall, standing close to the door, so that when it was opened it might act as a screen, concealing him temporarily from the view of whoever entered. There he remained, as near to the wall as he could get, fidgeting with his hands, now rubbing them softly together, now biting at his finger-nails, grinning all the time—and waiting.

Steps were heard ascending the stairs. And there were voices whose intonation was not friendly. Someone tried the handle of the door, then rapped sharply at the panels. Then, when there was no answer, cried, brusquely, sternly,—

‘Open the door in there!’

Mr Lazarus continued silent. He ceased to bite his nails, holding out his hands in the attitude of one who is about to clutch at something. To himself he murmured,—

‘That is not Bianchi. No, that is not Bianchi. That is a stranger whom Bianchi has brought with him.’

‘You are sure this is the room occupied by the man Lazarus?’

It was the same voice which put the inquiry; the voice which replied Lazarus recognised as the janitor’s.

‘That’s his room all right; leastways, the name he gave me was Lazarus, and he’s the man I’ve described to you.’

‘And you say that he’s in here now?’

‘He must be, unless he’s got up the chimney, or out of the window. It’s about a quarter of an hour since I saw him running up the stairs, and I heard him lock the door behind him; it hasn’t been opened since, that I’m sure.’

Only a quarter of an hour ago! To Lazarus it seemed longer. A lifetime had been packed within those fifteen

minutes. And so the janitor had seen him! He had not seen the janitor. Where had he been? The strange voice continued,—

‘And the young lady is with him?’

‘Where else can she be? He brought a young lady home with him, that I’ll swear. He took her into his room, and she hasn’t left it since.’

A sharp-eyed man that janitor. He had been cognisant of more than Lazarus supposed. The gentleman behind the door felt that he would like to say a few words to him, of a kind. There was a murmur of voices, not a friendly sound; one which suggested that several persons were without, who waxed impatient. There came another rapping, louder than the first.

‘Open the door! We know you’re in there. If you don’t open we shall break it down.’

Lazarus only hooked his fingers, and stretched out his hungry hands another inch or two, and grinned. He neither answered nor opened. So, soon, there came a fresh clamour at the panels, more exuberant than either of the others.

‘Lazarus! Lazarus! You devil Lazarus! You think to keep us out! You mistake. We will get at you through a hundred doors!’

This time the voice was known to the gentleman inside. He recognised it with a sudden distension of his already exaggerated grin. He began to fidget ferociously with his hands; his fingers opening and shutting, as if they itched.

‘That is Bianchi, that is my friend Bianchi; my dear, good friend. If you will promise to come in by yourself, alone, I will open the door at once. Then, after a little while, they can all come in—after a little while.’

But he did not say this aloud, or possibly the organist, flattered by the suggested compliment, might have availed himself of the kindly invitation.

‘Clear the way! Stand aside there!’

The voice which uttered the command—for it was a command—was the one which had been dominant throughout, and which sounded as if it were accus-

tomed to giving orders, and to being obeyed. Apparently the request was complied with; for, presently, a heavy body came dashing against the door, as if someone were hurling himself against it with all his force. Not much money had been spent on making the fastenings unduly strong; the gimcrack lock was plainly strained by the violence of the assault. Again and again and again there came the onrush of that vigorous frame, the lock yielding more and more, until, the fourth time, the door came open with a crash.

People came streaming in.

'Where is he?' inquired someone. Bianchi interposed, sounding as if he were half beside himself with excitement.

'I will find him! By all the saints in Heaven, I will find him!'

And he found him, then and there. Before the words were fairly from his lips, Lazarus sprang from behind the door, and, seizing him with his hungry hands, bore him aloft, as if he were a child. Before the others had realised the presence of the occupier of the apartment, or gained an inkling of his intention, Lazarus had dashed with his victim through the open window. Then, too late, they did rush after him, with shouts and threats. Before they could reach him, with the little man, struggling, fighting, yelling, held tightly in his arms, he had sprung over the iron railing on to the stone pavement, six storeys down below.

A scream rang through the air. Cries of horror rose from the street. Those looking over the railing held their breath.

And all was still.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SWAN SONG

WHEN they picked him up, Lazarus was dead ; killed, as the doctor said—the inevitable doctor who had suddenly appeared upon the scene—in half a dozen places. It was well for him, and well for the world, that he was dead. Sooner or later, anyhow, some decent soul would have been put to the labour of killing him.

Bianchi still lived. Lazarus had fallen underneath. It was owing to that fact, or to some freak of fortune, that the organist owed his life. He was broken to pieces ; a bundle of fractures, but the breath was yet in his body—and they kept it there, though he was never again to be the man he was before.

Had it not been for the janitor's reiterated assurance that the chamber's tenant had brought a young lady in with him, and that she had not gone out again, those who had come in search of Maud might have taken it for granted that her abductor had secreted her in some other hiding-place, and have left her to her fate. As it was, they ransacked every nook and cranny, turned out the contents of the huge wooden box—in vain. And it was only when, in accordance with someone's suggestion that there might be a false bottom to the chest, the box itself was lifted, that some sharp eye perceived that the flooring underneath had been tampered with.

Then, very quickly, the truth was learned. They found her, crammed between the joists.

In that moment, had Lazarus been alive, and within reach of some of those who were present in that upper room, he would still have been very near death's door.

He had done his work as thoroughly as he supposed. All the medical skill in Europe was summoned to her aid—without result. The empiric triumphed; the profession was at fault. As Lazarus had put it, he had taken the life right out of her; not all the doctors of all the schools could put it back again.

As was to be expected, opinions were divided. One great doctor said this; another great man ventured to surmise that; a third agreed with neither. The net result remained the same. The girl, so lately in the first full flush of her youth, and health, and strength, and beauty, all alert with kindling ambitions, glowing with the hot mercurial blood which coursed restlessly in her veins, now lay stiff and stark—and yet not cold. For she was not dead, though to all intents and purposes she might have been. She neither moved, nor breathed, nor spoke, nor did any of those things which we associate with life; and yet she lived.

Her condition was described by learned men in learned words—each set being apt to have their own particular formula; but the common sense of it seemed to amount to this—that she was in some sort of trance, from which all their arts were insufficient to draw her out. And she faded, visibly, before their eyes. So much was clear. One bold man went so far as to say that she was dying, while they looked on, not knowing what it was she was dying of, unable to do anything to stay her advance towards the grave.

This man was French, a leading light of the hospital of La Salpêtrière in Paris, where they make a peculiar study of certain esoteric conditions of the human frame, especially as they are to be found in females. This man, taking to himself a corner of the prophet's mantle, foretold that as she drew near death she would return, as it were, of her own volition to the portals of life, that is, to consciousness. And what he said proved true.

Madeleine, through all those weary days and nights, watched almost continually by Maud's bedside. Her remorse was pitiful to witness. She declared that the guilt of this innocent blood was on her head; that if it

had not been for her offence Maud would never have been in such a plight, and she implored them that they would allow her, to some extent, to expiate her sin by doing all that in her lay to win back for the girl something of that which she had lost. To this petition they acceded willingly enough, the more particularly since it was soon made plain that, had they searched the whole world over, they could not have found one more skilled or more assiduous, a nurse more to the manner born. So a bed was made up for her near Maud's, and in that room she practically lived, worked, watched, waited, prayed. How she prayed! Pouring out her heart's blood in supplications to the God, one of whose chief attributes, she had always been taught, was mercy.

And, at last, it seemed that her prayer was answered—in a measure.

One morning, between the dawn and the daylight, she knelt beside Maud's bed, and watched and prayed. She prayed that God's hand might be stretched forth, so that the girl who lay so silent on that splendid bed might be quickened into life. And, behold, even while the petition fluttered towards the Presence Chamber, Maud moved for the first time during all those weeks. Madeleine was so startled—the instant answer to her prayer seemed to speak with supernatural force of the nearness of Omnipotence—that, for the instant, she lost her presence of mind. The movement was but slight, yet it was sufficient. Maud turned her head a little to one side, and, to her inexpressible amazement, Madeleine perceived that her eyes were open, and that she was regarding her with what appeared to be the light of reason.

There was silence during the space of about a minute, as if each was realising the overwhelming strangeness of the position. Then Maud said, very faintly, yet with perfect clearness,—

'I thought that I was in Heaven, and that God came and touched me on the throat.'

Madeleine was bewildered; her whole being still occupied by the sensation of surprise. She could but murmur the other's name.

‘Maud!’

The response came quickly.

‘Sister!’

Such a mode of address from those lips, at that time, made Madeleine’s heart leap within her bosom, and blinded her eyes with tears. Her face fell forward on to the coverlet; she had to let it fall. For a while only her sobs were heard; then there came the question from the bed,—

‘Why do you cry?’

Madeleine lifted her face, her eyes streaming, her voice all broken.

‘I—I am so glad to hear you speak to me again—like that. Are you—are you better?’

‘Yes, I am better—I’m dying.’

‘Dying!’

The words stuck in Madeleine’s throat. There was something in the tone of Maud’s voice, in the expression of her face, which made it impossible to contradict her. The girl went on.

‘Do you remember my telling you that I wanted to use my voice to the glory of God? Well, I’m going to—among the choirs of angels.’

Madeleine was still. The revulsion of feeling was almost more than her strength could bear. Her expectations had been raised so high, in a moment to be dashed so low. She felt that what the girl said was true; she was becoming possessed by a profound conviction that already the Angel of Death was hovering near.

Regardless of Madeleine’s silence, or of what it might mean, Maud continued talking, in a strain which tried her listener to breaking point; it breathed a spirit which was so contrary to what she felt were her deserts.

‘You’ll have to take my place when I am gone—for good. It will be for good—for better, not worse. You’ll have to be me—a better me. I sha’n’t be missed—except that people seeing you will stare to see how much I have improved. You’ll have all my virtues—without my vices. You’ll be just the daughter of the house the house is wanting, and which I never could have been, possessed of all

my beauty, and all these other good qualities in which I have been lacking. Sister—won't you?' Madeleine was silent—speechless. 'Help to get my hand out from between these sheets. I want to feel yours clasped in mine.'

The request pointed to a degree of weakness which appealed to Madeleine on her practical side. The hand which she helped to bring from beneath the bedclothes was wasted, white and worn, small as a little child's. It closed on hers with a gentle pressure which seemed hardly to speak of earth—and, as it did so, the door was opened, the Earl of Staines came in.

He had about him a dishevelled look—suggesting a sudden rising from bed, a hasty putting on of his clothes. Maud greeted him with a faint smile, as if she had been expecting him.

'I thought that you would come,' she said.

The Earl glanced around him as if bewildered, then from one girl to the other—recognising Maud's condition with a start of amazement.

'Maud!' An access of confusion seemed to overwhelm him. 'I—I beg your pardon, but I—I thought I heard someone calling me.'

'Yes—it was God.'

'God?'

He echoed her blankly, having no notion of what she meant. His wound had healed, but he still bore about him traces of suffering, both physical and mental; he looked an older man than he ought to have done. She went on, in the same almost unnaturally quiet voice, her enunciation being so clear that every syllable was audible.

'I am dying, and God has called you out of sleep, and sent you to me, so that I can speak to you before I go, while we three are still alone.'

'Dying! Maud! You are dreaming.'

'No, I have been dreaming, but I am not now. I am wide awake, and can see, and know. I am going to where my voice will be of use—and I am leaving her to you.'

With a glance she signified that the reference was to Madeleine.

'Maud!'

'I want you to promise me that she shall be your wife.'

'If love can win her, I promise you she shall.'

He spoke hoarsely—as if he had to put pressure on himself to enable himself to speak at all. She turned to Madeleine.

'I want you to promise too.'

Again Madeleine's face was hidden in the coverlet—her vehement sobs threatening to choke her.

'Maud! Maud! Don't speak like that—don't! Think of what I am—nothing, and worse than nothing! Think of what I've done. If it hadn't been for me you would not be lying there; all would be well.'

Maud checked her with a slight movement of her hand; there was in her voice a touch of the old quizzical humour.

'Hush! All is well with me; and will soon be better. Don't you love him, sister?'

'Maud! Maud!'

The girl addressed her cousin.

'You hear? That is her answer. I will give you its interpretation; her love for you is such that she has not speech enough to tell you of its greatness. Come, give me your hand.' She raised her own hand from Madeleine's with a degree of care and expenditure of time which suggested that it was a by no means easy thing to do. She jested at this evidence of her debility. 'You see how strong I am?' Her attenuated fingers closed with a little playful pressure on his sinewy palm. 'Well, Staines, good-day to you. God's in His Heaven, all's well with the world.' She made a small grimace. 'I'm afraid I've only one hand under control. Madeleine, raise yours directly. There, Staines, take it in yours. You love each other; I believe you were made for each other; I bid you marry in the name of God.'

They were still. The Earl held Madeleine's hand tightly pressed in his. Presently he stooped and kissed it. Maud smiled.

'Bravo, Staines! Well done!'

Later, she expressed a wish to be taken to what she called her 'haven of refuge,' by which she meant the secret chamber, her seclusion in which had been the cause of all the complications. By this time, a small host of doctors had been summoned on the scene. It was their unanimous opinion that, since she was drifting from time into eternity, and that nothing would be likely to materially retard or expedite her progress, it would be just as well to gratify any wish she might express, so far as it was possible. So they placed her in a chair, built her up in it with cushions, and bore her into the adjacent chamber, her own room, with its gorgeous scheme of colour. There they set the chair upon the floor, and, under her specific instructions, manipulated the springs which gave access to her hiding-place.

Since it was impossible to force any sort of chair up the narrow stairway, Staines carried her up, bodily, in his arms, to the chamber above. There she startled them with a fresh request.

'I want you to leave me, all of you. I want to be left alone in my haven of refuge from the world, to be left alone as I've always loved to be.'

Some of the doctors still remained. Again they were consulted. They shrugged their shoulders, implied that it did not matter; nothing mattered, so long as help was close at hand in case it might be needed, and an eye was kept on what took place. It was only another whim of hers, which might as well be gratified.

So they left her in the great, curious chamber, all alone, seated in a huge arm-chair, which had originally been conveyed up there she alone knew how, packed up in it as comfortable as if she had been in bed. The trap-door which led into the room itself was kept open, without saying anything to her, and possibly without her cognisance; and, crammed together on the narrow stairway, Madeleine, the Earl, and one of the doctors remained on guard, probably, again, without her knowing they were there.

And, before long, a strange thing happened.

She had been very still, and, perhaps, judging from the

silence, had remained seated motionless in her chair, dreaming dreams, living through the past once more, drinking in details, each of which carried to her brain its own particular significance of the hiding-place she loved so dearly, and for whose existence she had paid so much. Madeleine pictured to herself the girl's rapt glances travelling round and round that queer, archaic chamber, and the little tremblement of the lip each time they lighted on some one or other of her more cherished treasures, and was wondering if it was right to leave her any longer in that perfect silence, silence which might mean so much, when there fell on her ears the sound of a song.

Maud was singing.

It was so unexpected, and the thoughts of each one of the listening trio had been so occupied with other themes, that, for a moment, it seemed as if the thing was supernatural. As if instinctively, they drew even closer together, if that were possible, and held their breath in a kind of awe.

In that closing hour, there had come back to her the gift which, in her strange waywardness, she had valued above all else—above wealth, and rank, and beauty, and even human love—the gift of song, come back to her in undiminished splendour. For, strangely enough, while her speaking voice had grown so weak and faint, her singing voice had all its old range, and strength, and tone, its marvellous timbre. It was like an organ pealing.

‘Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly ;
While the gathering waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.’

Of all the songs in the world, she had chosen to sing the hymn with which she had illustrated with such fatal effect her transcendent gift to Lazarus, when already he had her in his toils. Probably her choice was guided by the consciousness of its appropriateness at that, the supreme moment of her life. Beyond

doubt, it was a song she loved. To them, huddled together on the stairway, it was as if it were an angel singing, she poured forth such a wealth of celestial harmony, with such rapturous emotion, in such an ecstasy of joy.

She sang it right to an end, the concluding words ringing out, as it seemed to them, in a triumphant burst of melody, which was beyond and above all that had gone before,—

‘Thou of life the fountain art ;
Freely let me take of Thee ;
Spring Thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity,’

—and then was still.

Presently, urged by the doctor, Madeleine went up to see what was happening. With a cry, she climbed into the room, the others pressing after her.

Maud was dead ; asleep in the Eternal Arms.

She was on the floor, in front of her chair. It seemed as if she had stood up to sing, holding out her hands, perhaps, to meet the advancing angel, who, when he had removed her spirit, laid her body softly down. She seemed a tired, happy child at rest.

She could hardly have sounded a better advance note, or sent it pealing with a more glorious sweetness into the very courts of Heaven. It promised an efficient recruit to the angel choir.

CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT LADY

MADELEINE ORME is the present Countess of Staines. She was won, to be guilty of a seeming bull, against her will, yet with it, confessing her love, yet maintaining on various grounds her personal unworthiness. It was not without a struggle that she yielded; though it was well for her she did, for she is at present, perhaps, the happiest woman in England, as she has made her husband the happiest man.

The marriage took place with the full approbation of the Countess Dowager. That resolute old lady gave Madeleine much more of her affection than she had ever bestowed on Maud; maintaining with her latest breath that she must be the mislaid twin sister of the story-books, that she must be closely joined to the family by ties of blood.

That it was not so was clearly shown. It was proved beyond all possibility of doubt that her father had been the Rev. John Orme, clerk in holy orders, and her mother, his wife, Madeleine Raeburn, at one time governess. At the time of his marriage, Mr Orme had been a curate; within a year he was drowned while bathing. The news, brought to his wife an hour or two after Madeleine's birth, sent her after him. The baby girl was adopted by the landlady of the house in which the Ormes were lodging—a Mrs Clifford. No relatives of her parents could be found who were living; so this good woman brought up the little friendless orphan, while she lived, with her own son; Madeleine Orme and Geoffrey Clifford were as brother and sister. It

was through Geoffrey Clifford, in great measure, that the truth of these matters was ascertained.

It may be mentioned in passing that, to-day, Geoffrey Clifford is editor-in-chief of one of the most famous newspapers in the world.

Thus it was demonstrated that the bewildering likeness which existed between the two girls was the fruit of nothing but what some people would term 'a freak of nature,' but what Mrs Singleton preferred to describe as 'one of God's own miracles.'

Charles Singleton, who set the ball a-rolling which resulted in such strange happenings, is dead; but his wife still lives. She has retired from active service, and resides in a cottage on one of the Earl's estates, where she is in possession of the modest all which her heart desires.

Signor Bianchi also is still alive. He walks on two sticks, and his mental powers are not, at all times, so clear as they might be; but he still has a corner in the Earl's town house, where still he plays upon the organ. There are some who assert that he still communicates with Maud. Indeed, already the foundations of a pretty ghost story are being reared. It is reported that someone has been heard singing to the Signor's accompaniment, someone with a voice more beautiful than any human singer ever had. The secret hiding-place is hardly a secret any longer. It is known to many. The Earl and Countess use it as a retiring-room—to which, on more than one occasion, they have introduced their friends. But it has been stated that, when the Earl and Countess have been far away, someone has been heard passing in and out of the secret door—someone whose swishing skirts have betrayed her sex. And it is at these times that there has been that mysterious singing—that strange music, suggestive of another sphere.

Reginald Fanshawe is no more; death met him, a few months after his brother's wedding, while travelling in India. His mother died, of an apoplectic stroke, only last year.

Not one of the least singular features of the present

situation consists in the fact that comparatively few people have any notion that the Countess of Staines is not Maud Dorrincourt. She is actually so described in the peerages ; but then those compilations are, proverbially, little else than collections of fables. The circumstances of Maud's death were kept as quiet as possible for family reasons.

She was buried in the family vault, in the presence of but two or three persons. So it comes about that only a handful of people know that she is dead. The world at large believes the evidence of its eyes, and declares she is alive. It knows nothing of the existence of Madeleine Orme—though Madeleine Orme is, perhaps, the most popular woman in English society ; a true great lady, whose riches are as notorious as her benevolence ; a leader in all good works, who is held in high honour, for sufficient, righteous and valid reasons, the whole world over.

And yet she is nothing but 'one of God's own miracles.'



THE END

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| <i>SEPT</i> <i>2003</i> | Deacidification | <i>Magnesium Bi-Carbonate</i> |
| <i>SEPT</i> <i>2003</i> | Adhesives | <i>Wheat Starch Paste</i> <i>Animal Glue (Binding)</i> <i>Ethylene Vinyl Acetate (Binding)</i> <i>Paraloid / Texicryl</i> |
| | Lined / Laminated | <i>8.5gsm Heatset Tissue</i> |
| | Chemicals / Solvents | |
| | Cover Treatment | |
| | Other Remarks | |



